Elephant Graveyard

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Preface

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Elephant Graveyard

by Renaerys

Summary

A power beyond imagination is let loose upon the world, and two former enemies must join forces to find and stop it by any means necessary. / How does the haunted one sleep when waking is a dream, and the dream is not his? [Sequel to Triumvirate. Two parallel stories. Realistic Pokemon AU.]

Notes

You MUST read Triumvirate to fully understand and appreciate this fic. Nothing here will make any sense at all if you haven't read Triumvirate, so please don't take that warning lightly. This is a direct sequel to Triumvirate and picks up immediately where it left off.

Chapter 1

"It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account, we shall be more attached to one another." -- Mary Shelley

The Noveno Ocean was still and calm on this cloudless afternoon. Its cerulean waters barely broke with waves, and large marine Pokemon such as Alomomola and Mantine swam just under the surface soaking up the warm sunbeams and drifting south lazily with the current. Endless blue stretched in all directions, unbroken by land. The sun was setting and cast a rich goldenrod glow over the sea as if it were a bath of liquid gold. For a few precious moments, there was tranquility and peace, and the worries of the world were far from here.

A school of Luvdisc followed in the shadow of the group of Mantine and their Remoraid parasites, beady eyes wide and constantly on the lookout for predators that might rush up from the deep. This far south of Kanto, where the Noveno gave way to the balmy waters of the northern Settimo Ocean and the Orange Archipelago, colder-water predators such as Sharpedo and Dewgong were a rare sight, but the vast ocean held dangers hidden in its dark depths. Even a moment's carelessness could be the difference between life and death, and the only safety was in size and numbers.

A small school of Lapras, about twelve in total, were the only sound on the wind in from the north. They were yet leagues away from the Mantine and Alomomola and Luvdisc, but they moved swiftly and sang a soulful melody as they serenaded each other. They were migrating south to the frigid waters of the Settimo near the pole, where they would rear their young on floating glaciers until they were big enough to make the journey north again.

The Luvdisc stayed close in a streamlined formation, fluttering their heart-shaped tailfins in unison and cruising along under the Mantine's shadowy aegis. Everything was still and quiet, peaceful. Until all of a sudden, the Luvdisc spooked. A few in the back of the school rushed forward, bumping into the others and speeding up the group in a panic. They formed a tight ball and churned the waters, disturbing the Mantine just above.

The giant rays dove, agitated and wary of the Luvdisc's erratic behavior that could mean only one thing: danger was coming. With the advantage of size and numbers, the Mantine glided away into the deep away from the disturbance, confident in their dearth of natural predators. The Alomomola swam faster but remained near the surface, eager to put distance between the scrambling Luvdisc and whatever

was coming, but they were slow. The Luvdisc buzzed about like cornered Combee, too afraid to dive and too slow to outrun most big predators. All they had was their numbers and the hope that some of them would survive whatever attack was coming.

A silvery light rose out of the darkness below, no bigger than a pinprick at first but gaining in size and speed as it raced to the surface. The Alomomola flailed and made a hard bank to the west to escape, but they were too slow. Like a bullet shot from the abyssal trenches, the mass burst through their ranks, scattered the Luvdisc, and breached the water's surface with a loud *smack*. The once placid ocean frothed and churned around the disturbance as whatever had propelled the mass to the surface caught up to it. Luvdisc leaped from the water like a blizzard of cherry blossom petals, frantic and trying to regroup. The commotion lasted just under a minute, and the waters began to calm once more, the fish scattered, and the ocean stilled once again.

Except for the one that remained.

The gelatinous mass, glowing faint silver, popped like a stuck balloon and burst open, whereby it immediately began to disintegrate into nothing. It birthed a man, or what had once been a man. Half dead and a stranger even to himself, he sucked in a wet, rattling breath as though he had forgotten how after so long in the dark frigid deep. His newborn dark eyes were contracted to pinpoints as the dusking sun flooded them with light, and he made an awful choking sound of pain, slamming a hand over his eyes to shield them in darkness. The ocean sucked him back down, but he kicked frantically to stay afloat---the half of him that still lived remembered that much. Coughing, it took him a moment to get his bearings and for his eyes to adjust to the light.

Sucking in shallow breaths, he tried to look around and find something, anything that could help him. Land, there had to be land. The currents would wash him toward land, surely. There was none in sight. Survival was his only thought. He didn't think of how he'd gotten here, why, or when. He needed to survive.

Salt water filled his lungs as his shoulder seared with pain, and he had to stop treading water for a moment in the aftershock of it. His head pounded as though someone was hammering nails into the back of his skull in time with his racing heartbeat. It would have been so easy to sink back into the depths and let the crushing pressure take him back. But he had made it this far, somehow, some way, and he had never been the type to take the easy way out.

The group of Lapras Surfed past, parting to avoid him struggling in the water. The man watched them through his blurry vision, eyes stinging as the salt tried to burn holes in them.

Help me, he wanted to shout at them. *Come back!*

The Lapras continued to swim south, away from him, leaving him behind. He channeled all his physical strength into lifting a hand out of the water and reached for them as they passed him by, willing them to stop. His fingers clawed at the water, grasped at the sky above, and he swallowed the urge to cough.

"Help me!" he shouted, wet and creaking like a child sick from screaming.

He suffered a mouthful of seawater for his trouble. Physically exhausted and mentally drained of even the will to hang on, he felt his body shutting down, pushed beyond its limits, and sank below the surface. The salt ate at his eyes and crawled in his ears and infected his throbbing head as he watched the sun through the crystalline blue water above, sinking farther and farther away as he fell back to darkness.

All of a sudden, something jostled him from his left, and he choked as he was thrown roughly about. His vision darkened with black spots, on the verge of drowning and hurting all over. A rush of motion and a burst of velocity propelled him up, and once more he breached the water's surface. Water sluiced down his arms and back, but it didn't drag him back down. Something hard rested under his chest, and he gagged. Water erupted from his mouth and spilled over the rough grey surface supporting him. His body convulsed, and his head hit something hard and sharp, a spike of some sort. Seeing double and blinking fresh blood from his left eye, he lay there and waited, trying to remember what it was like to breathe, to exist beyond pain. The only thought in his mind now was that he was not drowning anymore. He was alive. The pain proved it.

Slowly, he began to move. His arms were weak and screamed in protest as he tried his weight on them. He gritted his teeth against the pain and did his best to push himself higher onto the hard surface.

Something moved under him, and a slimy snout nipped at the ripped mesh and salt-corroded plates of armor on his back. It was hauling him up higher to safety, taking some of his weight, and with its help, he was able to balance on wobbling elbows. His vision began to adjust through the stinging, and he was very still.

A growl, more like a low humming, almost melodic, sounded near his head. One of the Lapras that had passed him by before was looking right at him, its long elegant neck twisted to see him better as it ferried him on its hard-shelled back. Panting, he stared back into those dark dilated eyes, a look he knew he recognized but couldn't quite place. It had come back for him... Why?

Grunting with the effort, he made one final push to haul himself completely onto Lapras's back. He used one of the jagged spikes in its

shell for leverage and managed to pull his legs out of the water. On his back, he looked up at the sky, brilliant orange and pink and purple in the dying light of day, blinking and trying to remember what had happened. How he got here. Who he was.

He lifted his left hand to brush his damp red hair from his eyes, but found something clutched tightly in his fingers. He stared at the bent little thing, misshapen and soggy from overexposure to the water, and his mind went blank for a moment. He brought it closer to his face, puzzled, and tried to make it out. Silvery fronds poked out from between his fingers, but the thing had kept some of its original shape.

A feather?

Like waking from a dream, memory crawled through his ears to his waterlogged mind. Slowly at first, but the longer he stared at the feather---he was sure it was a feather---the faster it returned to him.

Shamouti Island. The legendary beast, Lugia, summoned from the deep to do his bidding. *His bidding.*

Lapras hummed again, its dark eyes trained on his, and he recognized the look in their depths, a perfect reflection of himself.

Lugia, banished again to the depths by its guardian beasts. It had taken him with it. And the last sight he had seen was a woman's face. She was reaching for him. She had called out to him:

"Lance!"

Lance gagged and rolled onto his side. He vomited a cocktail of bile and seawater, opaque and acrid. His stomach dry heaved for several minutes after it was empty, and he shook like a leaf. Lapras hummed again and nudged him out of concern. Concern he had imposed upon it.

He remembered.

"Lily," he rasped, picturing her face. It was so clear in his mind that he could hardly believe he'd forgotten it.

She did this to me.

He remembered their battle on Shamouti Island, a dance of Dragons. She had been formidable, beyond his expectations for a fortynblod raised outside the Taki Dynasty's influence. He remembered the vision of mighty Dragonite unleashing its ultimate Draco Meteor attack and decimating Shamouti Island only to fall to Lily's lowly Dragonair. Tears stung his eyes as he relived the memory of Dragonite falling from the sky to its death.

He remembered the look in her eyes as she reached for him in those final moments, fleeting but unforgettable, just before he was plunged into darkness, dead to the world. But the darkness retained no hold over him now. Dragonite had fallen, and Lugia too, but he was here, starving and atrophied and a ghost of his former self. Or perhaps reborn into something else, something more. What doesn't kill

Lance the Dragonmaster should have tried harder.

He looked at the misshapen Silver Wing clutched in his bloodless fingers. Her creation. His salvation. He could have laughed if it wouldn't have burst a lung. Slowly, he loosened his grip until the feather fell from his grasp into the water. The gentle waves in Lapras's wake quickly engulfed it and sucked it under. In a matter of seconds, the Silver Wing was gone from his sight, reclaimed by the sea and the darkness that had not wanted him.

Lance lay back on Lapras's shell, bent at an angle to avoid impalement on one of its deadly spikes, and stared up at the darkening sky, mauves and oranges and bloody scarlets. He listened to the sound of his breathing, shallow and rattling, and wondered how long he could survive out here in the open ocean.

"Lapras," he whispered, barely audible over the mild northern breeze.

Lapras hovered into his line of sight and bared its sharp teeth as though on the verge of responding. Even battered and useless as a soggy newspaper left in the dew to deteriorate, Lance could feel the pull between Lapras and himself, the magic that made him who he once was, and would be again.

"Find land."

Lapras turned its long neck to face forward once again and glided through the water swiftly. It let out a long, mournful note, but there was no response. Its herd had abandoned it. Ensnared by the Dragonmaster's influence, Lapras was as good as dead to them now. There was no escaping a Titan's influence.

But it quieted down and pressed on, its innate sense of direction honed from the many migrations it had made through these waters more reliable than any compass. It was just a matter of time. With enough motivation and the strength to back it up, everything was only ever a matter of time.

The only question remaining to him now was what he could do when that time was up? What came next? What does a dead man do when he finds himself no longer dead? The sunset colored Lance's vision, blurred with tears as he thought of the Pokemon that had fallen before him. What life is worth living without the ones you love the most to spend it with?

He dozed, his mind swimming with delirium and dehydration and the crushing wounds he had suffered in battle, and Lapras ferried him ever south to parts unknown. He had a dream that they came upon a great waterfall that fell away to nothing, forever and ever. The edge of the world, and he without wings to carry him. He reached the edge of the world and its frothing currents, knowing it was useless to fight them now. And Lily was there just behind him, immune to their pull

and reaching for him. She was crying, and he told himself it was for him. It was because if he drifted any farther, he would fall for real this time and there would be no coming back, and to go without anyone at all to watch, to mourn, would be too much even for him to bear. He reached back, but she was so far away and receding farther. She cried, and her tears became the sea that pulled him under, dragged him toward the edge, drowning him.

No! he wanted to scream at her. *Stop resisting me!*

But the waters raged around him and carried him over the edge, and she reached for him---pushed him away, commanded the waters to bury him in the darkest trench they could reach and banish him farther still. He was falling fast to a place he was sure he would not escape this time because it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done; death comes for us all, the strong and the weak, the brave and the cowardly. We are all of us unworthy of life when death comes knocking.

"You're not worth it," Lily said as she watched him fall over the edge.

He landed in a cramped room where no light and no wind could penetrate. The air was thick with the coppery stench of blood and rust. A faceless man loomed impossibly tall and big and monstrous. The claustrophobia of that place, of that man, and the sound, like a wringing damp rag, when he unsheathed his sword from Lance's father's stomach filled the cramped space. His father had cried, too, but only for himself.

Lance the boy had survived that murder house. He had survived the butcher and cast off his craven father's name and taken a new one. He had been reborn in that bloody place and become someone else. The pain faded, the fear with it, and the smell of his father's blood, already cold and thin and hardly recognizable. There was only the anger, the demonic rage nursed on years of solitude and raised on a diet of deceit so ingrained that he missed it even now as the fever-dream swallowed him whole.

It bubbled to the surface, a red fury replaying his failures over and over and over as if to remind him that he was his father's son, and did you really think you could change that? Did you really think you could be something else, something more, something better? In the end, you're still that scared little boy huddled in the corner in a puddle of his own filth, watching like a fucking sheep as they killed your father and he didn't put up a fight, not for himself and certainly not for you. But you didn't fight, either. You let it happen, just like you let that girl beat you. *You*, the Champion! The best there ever was. You craven little shit, you *let it happen*. Maybe you even *wanted* it, an easy way out just like the last time. But you know something,

Dragonmaster Lance?

He was falling, and Lily's fingers were clutched around his chin, her nails digging into his cheeks and growing, sharp and curved and boring into him. She drew her thumb over his lower lip and he tasted her tears. The faceless man's voice on her lips:

"You're not worth it."

She blurred in his dream vision and he opened his mouth to scream, to bite a chunk out of her, anything to drag her down with him and prove her wrong. Wrong! *You're wrong!*

The anger gave him strength and he caught her neck in his hands and squeezed with all his might. But she was not her anymore, and not the faceless man either. Nothing but a blur of color, smoke between his fingers, and gravity had caught up to him. Still he squeezed, his fingers searching for a stronghold, anything to sink his claws into.

Flesh gave under his nail and warm blood bloomed under his fingers, greasing his palms. The mist faded, and suddenly he opened his eyes. Bright light flooded his vision, and the sensation of water in his ears evaporated as he heard the sounds of struggling, a man's voice, strangled and desperate.

"Oh my god!"

A woman's voice startled him, and something heavy slammed into his side and pried at his wrists. Delirium and dehydration made him dizzy and blind, and salt and sun had exacerbated his wounds and enervated his body to some point beyond worldly pain. He didn't struggle as he felt his body rise, hands underneath him, something cool on his forehead that burned frigid after so long floating under the searing sun.

"Quick now, get him inside," a man's voice echoed somewhere above.

Lance was vaguely aware of his body moving, or rather being moved, but time and space blended together as shadows moved over and around him. Voices blended in his ears like churned milk, sluicing and curdling and dripping, unintelligible save for a few words here and there. He tried to say something, but his throat burned and his tongue was parched and stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Inside..." a voice trailed off.

He had the vaguest sensation of falling, thinking this was just another dream and now came the last fall, the sinking to darkness eternal. But something gave under his weight, soft and warm, and he wondered if he'd already died long ago.

Something smooth was placed over his face, and the air became easier to breathe, crisper and cleaner. A light went on overhead, blinding, and he saw no more. Fingers messed with his arms, his

chest, poking and prodding, but he couldn't care anymore. He closed his eyes and saw that bloody room, smelled the old shit that had dried and become sticky where he sat, and saw his father's broken body staring back at him, wide-eyed and unseeing even as his mouth moved, though Lance the boy could not make out the words.

A pinprick on his arm, distant, somewhere outside the dream, and soon everything went dark.

He couldn't say how much time had passed since he blacked out dreaming of that slaughterhouse where he'd sat frozen for hours until someone had found him. A Blackthorn soldier had reached out a hand and led him outside to the light, where the mountains smelled sterile and strange after so long breathing in the stench of death and fear.

Except when he opened his eyes to the light this time, there were no mountains and no soldier holding his hand, and he was not a child unused to being alone in the world. Blinking blearily, Lance let his eyes adjust to the unfamiliar surroundings slowly. The walls were pastel yellow, bright and happy. The lights were dimmed and the lacy white curtains were open to let in the sunlight and fresh air, which smelled faintly of salt and overripe fruit. He tried to move and felt heavy, lethargic, like he'd been set in concrete. But there was little pain, curiously.

It took him a few minutes to regain full consciousness. He managed to wiggle his toes and fingers---everything was intact and in its proper place, good. A white blanket covered him from the chest down, and he wore unfamiliar clothes, loose-fitting and casual, well-worn. An IV stand stood next to him and fed him through a tube in his arm, glistening purple liquid he recognized as a Potion. When he tried to move his arm, it was an ordeal getting it up. But he managed and felt around his shoulder. It was heavily bandaged, but it hurt little more than a dull ache. Emboldened, he shifted his weight and tried to sit up.

"Oh, you're awake!" a voice said from somewhere to the left. "Careful, don't push yourself."

An older woman flew to his bedside from the doorway and pressed her veiny hand against his chest to force him to lie back down. Incredibly, she forced him down rather easily as though he were nothing but a sickly boy. She misread the incredulity on his face for surprise rather than a shock of indignation and smiled kindly.

"There now, no need to rush things. You're still recovering, lad."

She had a kind voice, matronly and soft spoken, like one used to reassuring the very young and the very sick. Her salt and pepper hair was tied back in a neat and sensible bun at the base of her skull, and she wore smart rimless glasses before her dark eyes. Her skin was a natural copper tone, and a few age spots blotted her cheeks and neck

like a pox. Despite the warmth in the air, she wore long sleeves and a modest, ankle-length skirt with loafers. A name tag on her shirt read 'Dolores'.

"Dolores," Lance said, wincing at the sound of his weak voice.

"Well, you speak the common tongue, that's good," Dolores said. "Don't look like you're from around these parts, though. Open up."

Before he could make sense of what she was saying, she forced his mouth open and shoved a cold thermometer under his tongue. He gagged, but she clamped his mouth closed and gave him a warning look like she might shove the thing down his throat if he didn't stop squirming. When she was satisfied with the reading, she removed the device and frowned at it.

"Your fever's gone. Far's I can tell, that sunburn's the only thing making you a bit warm."

"Wa..." he rasped, swallowing the dryness in his throat.

"Speak up, please," Dolores said, looking down at him over her hooked nose not unkindly.

"Water," he managed.

Her mouth twitched. "Normally I'd not tolerate such a blunt request, but I imagine you're having some trouble speaking. Just this once, then." She got up and filled a clean glass with water from the nearby tap and brought it to him. Lance gulped it down when she helped him sit up and held it to his lips. "Around these parts, folks say 'please' and 'thank-you' to one another. You remember that, lad."

Lance downed the glass and breathed deeply. His throat still stung, and his stomach twisted as it finally got something in it after who knew how long. "Please," he said, tamping down his pride and anger at being at the mercy of some old thrall woman.

She nodded silently and refilled the glass for him. He drank it down again and laid back against the pillow, feeling markedly better than he had just minutes ago. Outside the window, he could make out lush green trees. Birds chirped somewhere unseen. He must be on some island, he figured, but this didn't look like Cinnabar.

"So, you want to tell me who you are and where you came from?" Dolores asked pointedly.

He couldn't be anywhere near Cinnabar if this woman didn't know him. And if she didn't recognize him, he wasn't about to help her along. Instead, he cleared his throat and shifted on his cot, buying a few seconds to collect his thoughts.

"Luke," he said, using his father's name without thinking too much about it. The best lie was the one closest to the truth. "I'm from Johto."

She looked at him curiously. "Johto? Lad, you're a long way from home."

"What's a long way, exactly?"

"This is Fairchild Island. You're smack in the middle of the Orange Archipelago."

Fairchild Island...

Lance's mind raced. That was a good thousand miles south of Cinnabar and the Kanto mainland and far from where Shamouti used to stand. No wonder she didn't recognize him. Fairchild was a small island with a small population. There was no Gym, no militia, and no urban civilization around for miles. The Orange Archipelago's main military force was located far to the south on Mandarin Island. Fairchild was little more than a blip on the map. If he'd drifted just a little farther south to somewhere more urban, like Kinnow or Valencia, surely someone would have recognized him. Pure luck, or perhaps something more mysterious, had landed him here instead.

Dolores saw the relief in his eyes and once again read into it what she wanted. "That's right, some local boys found you washed up on the beach. A Lapras ferried you here. She's in the bay now, won't leave n'matter what the kids do. Some boys tried to coax her closer to ride her, but she swims off and comes back when they're gone. You've got a loyal Pokemon there, lad. Are you some kind of trainer?"

Lapras was still here. Lance fisted his hand, willing the blood to flow to his fingers. He still had control, then. Excellent.

He felt Dolores's eyes on his clenching fist. "Trainer?" he said. "Lapras is the only Pokemon with me."

She seemed satisfied with his answer and let it drop. "Well, you best recover and get back to her. She sure seems to miss you."

I'm sure she does.

Lapras would not abandon him unless he sent the beast away, something he had no desire to do anytime soon. But Dolores was right about one thing: he would need to recover. His body was weak and frail, his confidence shot, and his failures had followed him here to this godforsaken place in the middle of nowhere. His heart told him to run, to get away from this backwater place, but Lance the Dragonmaster had never been a man ruled by passion.

"Thank you for tending to me," he said, feeling stronger of voice after the water he'd drunk. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

Dolores lit up a little and graced him with a wrinkled smile. "Why, you're very welcome, Luke. It's no trouble at all. I'm glad to know you'll be all right. What...did happen to you, by the way?"

"I'm afraid it's all a blur," he lied easily. "I was traveling among the northern islands, but ended up in the sea after an accident."

Dolores put a hand to her heart and made a concerned tutting sound. "You poor dear, that's terrible. Capsized at sea... And all alone, too. You're lucky to be alive."

Lance said nothing.

"Don't you fret, now. You're in good hands here. We take care of our own. You just think about resting and recovering, you hear?"

She got up to leave him, and Lance spared her a practiced smile for her trouble. When he was alone again, he checked his person to assess the extent of the damage. His wounds were healing steadily enough, but the real damage was in recovering from the harshness of the open ocean. He was gaunt, his skin blistered and peeled with sunburn, and the unshakeable lethargy he'd felt before would not leave him. He needed his strength back, and for that he would need rest and nourishment.

Out of habit, his fingers when to his hip, but there were no Pokeballs there. He lay back and stared at the ceiling. A Dragonmaster without Dragons was no better than any non-Tamer thrall on this backwater island.

"What am I going to do?" he whispered aloud, as though someone might answer.

There was only the breeze, the birds chirping, and Lapras waiting in the bay. Somewhere out there were also the ones who had put him here. He wondered what they were doing now, what had become of them. What had become of her. He would never know as long as he remained here.

So he settled back into the cot and let his eyes drift shut. He did not return to that bloody shack where his father lay dying, nor to the bottom of the dark ocean where he'd been banished until now. There was only the sweet darkness of sleep, the warm salt breeze around him, and the sun warming his blanket. Lance drifted off to a dreamless sleep, for the time for dreams was over.

The days passed and blurred together, and soon enough Lance was up and about and learning how to be human again. Dolores, he'd learned, was the head nurse at the local clinic, the only one on the island. It was in her care that he remained, though he had no money to pay for lodgings or medical care. Instead, she had put him to work in her clinic, menial tasks, mostly. Washing bedclothes and bandages, taking inventory, and the like. She had a team of junior nurses to help her, and a doctor visited once a month from neighboring Kinnow Island. Lance accepted the work without complaint, not wanting to give the old woman a reason to throw him out before his body and spirit were ready to leave.

Lapras had indeed remained in the bay and responded to his pull when he went to find it. It was a large Pokemon, but fairly average for its species. Still, it had saved his life, even if the act had not been a selfless one. In water up to his knees, Lance reached a hand towards Lapras, and the beast swam closer to him in the shallows. Its eyes were dilated under the haze of his control, but it was as docile as a

Deerling and allowed him to pat its leathery snout.

"Soon, you'll stay of your own accord," he said.

A group of local children in salt-stained clothes splashed nearby in a game but stopped to gawk at Lapras. Lance could feel their envy and wonder at his ability to get so close to such a magnificent Pokemon. He'd felt it himself once, a lifetime ago, before he learned how to channel that feeling into the control he exerted now. The thrall children would never know that feeling, lacking in Tamer abilities as they were.

"Hey, Mister Luke," one of the children, a ten-year-old boy named Odane who was missing a couple teeth courtesy of a tree-climbing habit, called out with a wave. He was a familiar sight to Lance at the clinic, where he often stopped by to deliver food. Dolores was his mother's cousin. It seemed to Lance that everyone on this island was probably related in some way. At the ass-end of the world, people had to make do with what they had.

Lance eyed Odane and the other children, all scruffy and damp from their play, sunkissed and sticky with salt. They were simple people with simple minds and simple wishes, far below him, though they couldn't know it. There were many things they would never know, he supposed. They would never tame a Dragon or cross an ocean or know glory and fame. Perhaps they would never even leave this island. And the more he watched them splashing and laughing and stealing glances at Lapras, the more the thought made him strangely angry, bitter. They did not know all that they were missing, and more than likely, they would grow up never caring to know. It was unimaginable to him. To be content with the lives they had always known... Did they not wonder about the world the way they wondered about Lapras? The way Lance had at their age?

"Come here, boy," Lance said.

Odane was a skinny brown boy in cut-off shorts, barefoot, with his eyes just a little too far apart on his broad face. The other kids whispered among themselves, and one shoved him forward, nearly tripping him. He turned back and made a face at them, but bravely approached Lance. Scratching his head sheepishly, Odane looked down at his feet as though he'd committed some egregious sin and now awaited his punishment.

"Are you afraid?" Lance asked, truly curious.

Odane looked up abruptly, embarrassed and red in the face, and defiantly shook his head. "N-No, sir!"

The other kids giggled, making him even redder, but they kept their distance.

Cravens, Lance thought, remembering the petty cruelty of children from his own childhood. They liked to pick on the ones who were

alone, the ones with no one simply because they could. Lance hated most children. Perhaps it was that cruel nostalgia, or perhaps it was the fact that Odane was a familiar face to him at the clinic, though the boy had never said more than a shy greeting to him, wary of the pale stranger washed up from a distant land. Whatever it was, Lance felt compelled to speak to him truthfully.

"There's no shame in admitting fear," Lance said, ignoring the other children as he looked down at the skinny little boy before him. "But there can be a grave danger in ignoring it."

Lance nodded for Odane to hold out his hand, and Lapras stared down at him with large dark eyes. Odane's hand was shaking even as he obediently reached for Lapras, close enough to touch its snout, when Lapras suddenly sneezed and sprayed cold snot and water. Odane yelped and fell back on his rear in the water. His eyebrows and lashes and hair were dusted with crystallized mucous and frost. The other children had also jumped in fright, thinking their friend under attack, and ran splashing back to shore.

Odane stared, wide-eyed and incredulous, up at Lapras. "Cool! That was so gross!" He splashed sea water on his face to wash away the sticky cold snot, unbothered in a way only a child can be.

Lance let Lapras swim off, where it dove underwater and disappeared from sight, though it would not wander far. Odane, now grinning from ear to ear, called back to his friends, "Didya see that?"

But the other children were long gone. Nonetheless, Lance found himself on the receiving end of Odane's brilliant, toothless smile as the boy thanked him. Blinded by that sheer joy he rarely saw directed at him---*all he did was get sneezed on, why is he so happy?*---it took Lance a moment to hear what Odane was trying to say to him.

"Aw man, there's gotta be somethin' I can do to repay you, Mister Luke," Odane said. "Oh, I know! D'you like snow cones? I know a place in town that makes the *best* Pinap berry snow cones and---"

"I'm not interested in sweets," Lance said, ready to dismiss the youth and wondering what the hell had come over him trying to get the boy to understand something beyond his limited capacity.

Odane was not offended by Lance's brusque tone. "Oh, that's okay! I mean, I guess since you were asleep for so long, you probably wanna eat your favorite foods instead. I know everybody on Fairchild Island, so you can just ask if there's anything you wanna eat or somebody you wanna meet. You can depend on me!" He puffed out his little chest proudly.

Lance paused a moment, thinking. Perhaps this boy in all his innocent ignorance could be useful, after all. "Actually, there is something I'd like."

"Name it!"

"Do you know about what happened on Shamouti Island a few weeks ago?"

Dolores had been tight-lipped when he broached the subject before, claiming that the goings-on of the world were not her concern when there were injured and sick people to worry about. Lance had not found any old newspapers lying around, either, though he gathered that several weeks had passed since his defeat on Shamouti Island.

Odane's smile faltered. "Shamouti? Why'd you wanna know about that? It's all flooded and stuff now after what happened. That's what my papa said."

"I've been sleeping for a while," Lance said carefully. "I'm...feeling out of the loop, and I don't remember much. I don't even know what's been happening in the world since I came here."

Odane shrugged. "Um, well, if you wanna know about Shamouti, my papa's a naval officer!" he said triumphantly. "He was there. Pretty awesome, huh?"

Yes, it is.

"I'd like to meet your father, Odane," Lance said. "Consider it a thank-you for introducing you to Lapras."

Odane seemed to glow with excitement. "Aw, yeah! That'd be great! He just got back from another mission, and Mama was sayin' how curious she was about you from Auntie Dolores. We don't get much visitors, ya know? Hey, how about tonight? Mama's a great cook!"

Lance smiled politely. "Tonight would be perfect."

And so, Lance found himself seated at a humble, round table that could seat ten comfortably having forced himself to eat everything that was put in front of him even after he was full. Growing up the disgraced orphan of a once prominent Titan noble turned craven, Lance had learned from a young age never to refuse what was given to him, no matter how small or how insignificant it might seem at the time. Food, especially, was never to be shunned. There was a time in his life, before his Old Blood manifested and his innate control was discovered by the Blackthorn Elder, when he had not known when he would get his next meal, or when the pity of strangers would run its course.

Odane's mother, Chevelle, was a plump woman with a pretty face, round and kind, with sharp brown eyes that matched her cousin's and full lips that did not. She knew her way around the kitchen and her seven children, of which Odane was the third youngest. Like most of the families on Fairchild Island, Odane's was large and full of love and tradition, an existence completely foreign to Lance. But he kept his thoughts to himself as he politely asked Chevelle about her children,

about the meal, and other thoughtful small talk that kept her smiling throughout the meal. She was curious about his work helping her cousin, Dolores, at the clinic while he recuperated, and Lance told her what she wanted to hear. He knew how to be charming and acquiescent when he needed to be, having braved a life of ignominy as an orphan and then later growing up under the Blackthorn Elder's harsh tutelage as the prodigious heir to the Taki Dynasty after his Titan powers manifested.

Odane's father, a sergeant in the Orange Navy, was called Aldane, and he was a small man with small confidence next to his commanding wife. Chevelle ran the house and everyone in it, which Lance observed within the first five minutes of dinner watching them interact. It was Chevelle he would have to convince, not her pliant husband. By the end of the dinner, though, Lance was pretty sure he had mollified the woman enough to convince her he had no ill motives, though he could sense she had an islander's natural distrust of strangers in the way her gaze lingered on him, as though he might suddenly grow talons and attack. Odane's gushing story about Lapras helped, though Chevelle had expressed some concern about her young son being so close to a dangerous Pokemon.

"Nah, it wasn't dangerous, Mama!" Odane said, smiling from ear to ear. "You shoulda seen it! Mister Luke told Lapras to come over and greet me, and she did. It was amazing!"

"That's very nice, Odane," his father said. "I hope you thanked Mister Luke?"

"Yeah, you bet I did! Man, I'll never forget it. It was so amazing!"

Chevelle watched Lance carefully throughout the evening, but she seemed to find little fault with him that she could justify. Everyone knew he'd washed up on the shore after who knew how long adrift on the open ocean. He'd revealed that he was from Johto, also not a lie. No one knew who he really was or even his real name, and Lance planned on keeping it that way. But sometimes, to receive one must be willing to offer something in return.

"That Lapras must be real loyal to you," Chevelle said as she cleared plates and bade one of her elder daughters to take Odane's two younger siblings, twin brothers of six years, to the bath to get cleaned up. "You must've had her for quite some time, I gather. They don't tame easy, isn't that right, Aldane?"

Aldane the naval sergeant looked up from his paper, surprised to have been called upon, and mumbled an 'oh, yes, of course, dear' before getting back to the article he'd been reading.

"Yes, Lapras is very loyal to me," Lance said easily. "Sadly, she's my only Pokemon. My others perished before I came ashore here."

Chevelle looked genuinely sorry. "That's terrible, it is. And you said

you were shipwrecked?"

"Yes, during the commotion on Shamouti Island a few weeks ago," Lance said. "My ship was passing through the area, and the storm capsized us. My Pokemon were lost or died in the storm. Only Lapras survived, and she carried me here."

A lie, to be sure, but close enough to the truth to sound convincing. The best lie was always the one closest to the truth. Every Titan knew that.

Aldane grunted. "The whirlpools around Shamouti're perilous all year round. Bad spot o' luck to be caught up in the storm on that particular day."

"And you're from Johto," Chevelle said. "Where were you headed to this far south? The only port in Johto that services Orange passenger ships oughtta be Olivine, isn't that right, dear?"

Aldane grunted, disinterested, but Lance smiled smoothly.

"That's right, but I was on a private yacht out of New Bark with plans to cross the Settimo and end up in Lilycove out in Hoenn. It was a friend's fortieth birthday, and he had plans to sail around the world. Well, ah, unfortunately it didn't go as planned." Lance lowered his gaze.

Chevelle gasped, horrified. "Sweet Swanna, I had no idea. You poor lad, I'm so sorry."

Lance said nothing, counting his seconds of silence and letting her read into them the pain and misery one might feel if the story were true. Chevelle looked like she wanted to inquire further, but she dropped the subject. Surely he was just a man who'd suffered some awful turn of fate and been saved by the love and loyalty his only remaining Pokemon bore for him. Why would anyone lie about that? And he had such a disarming smile, handsome even, if she'd been twenty years younger. Those angles and sharp incisors made him look rugged in a way her fellow islanders could never match...

"Well, Fairchild's a friendly place," she said. "You couldn't have picked a better place to recover. Where will you go once you're feeling better?"

Lance sipped the coffee she'd poured for him after the meal. "Actually, I was hoping to ask your husband about that."

"Hm?" Aldane looked up from his folded paper. His widely-spaced dark eyes and drawn face matched Odane's almost perfectly, like an older version of his son.

"I was shipwrecked," Lance went on, "but of course, I have no way of knowing what happened between then and now. Odane told me you were part of the naval outfit sent to Shamouti after the storm. I was wondering if you could help clear up some details for me. Perhaps there were other survivors from the ship I was on that you recovered?"

Aldane thought about this a moment, and Odane lost his patience quickly. "C'mon, Papa, tell him about those people you saved!"

Aldane blinked in surprise at his son, but Chevelle was far ahead of him and took Odane by the hand. "Come now, boy, it's time for you to wash up for bed, too. Say goodnight to your papa and Mister Luke."

Odane looked sullen, but he did as he was told. Arguing with his mother would not have been a wise idea. "Goodnight, Mister Luke, Papa."

Lance spared him a polite smile. "I'll be training with Lapras at the beach tomorrow. Perhaps I'll see you there."

Odane completely forgot his dour mood and lit up again. "Oh, yeah! Definitely! I'll be there for sure!"

Chevelle carted her son off to another room, leaving Lance alone with Aldane. The naval sergeant rubbed his stubbled chin and furrowed his dark brow in thought.

"Odane mentioned survivors?" Lance pressed, trying not to push. He forced himself to take a sip of his coffee to appear casual.

"Mm, that's right, we picked up four survivors on Shamouti after the storm subsided. Though, to be honest, there wasn't much o' Shamouti left to call it a proper island no more. Half the place was flooded and chewed up like an earthquake had gotten it."

Unbidden, Lance's memory flashed with an image of Dragonite. Dead, like all the rest of his Pokemon. Even the pink Dragonair's Pokeball had been lost when the sea swept him away, probably buried at the bottom of the sea along with that monster, Lugia. He gripped his coffee cup hard in his hands until his knuckles were white to get a lid on the shocking surge of fury at the thought. All his Pokemon, his Dragons that had been with him from the beginning when he was still just a nobody were gone. Aldane went on, oblivious to Lance's inner turmoil.

"I don't know what happened myself, to be sure," he said, "but those four looked like they'd been through some real hell. All young, too." He shook his head as though disgusted. "It ain't right, I tell you. Young people fightin' like that when they should be home with their families and bright futures ahead of 'em, it just ain't right."

"Oh?" Lance asked, his mind racing.

Four young people...

"But it don't matter much now," Aldane went on tiredly. "Turns out, I'm the dullard. Those four? Turns out they were some strong Tamers."

"And what happened to them?"

Aldane studied his cold coffee. "Far as I know, one of 'em became a Gym Leader in Viridian City. Word is Team Rocket used to run that place, and that kid took over."

"And the others?" Lance pressed.

"The others got jobs at the new Pokemon League. It was all over the news. Ah, just a minute." Aldane got up and rummaged about a drawer in the kitchen. He came back with a small stack of newspaper clippings. "Chevelle likes to keep the stories she reads when they have to do with the Orange Navy. This one mentions those four, down here at the bottom."

Lance accepted the news clippings and read. It was a testament to his self-control that he did not rip the papers to shreds as he read. Gary Oak, the young Clairvoyant, had indeed taken over the Viridian City Gym with plans to oversee the rest of Pallet Town's reconstruction and to purge the last of Team Rocket's vile influence over the region. He had the full backing of the rest of the Gyms, who had come together in new peace talks and pledged to move forward as an allied nation rather than a smattering of independent and sometimes hostile city-states.

Ivy, the Reaper that Lance remembered as the Rocket Admin he'd met so long ago back in Blackthorn, was a Pokemon Ranger in Kanto now and reported to the new Pokemon League in Indigo Plateau.

The new Pokemon League.

The words burned into his mind like a bad omen. He forced himself to read on. There was a new Pokemon League in Indigo Plateau that had replaced the old one, the members of which everyone believed to be dead, including Lance himself. Lieutenant Surge of Vermilion was the new League's official leader and spokesperson, and Chuck of Cianwood represented Johto's interests. Ash Ketchum, a young Medium from Pallet Town, had replaced Agatha by her own nomination. So the old hag was still alive, Lance thought bitterly. But what caught Lance's particular attention was the name of the fourth member of the new League: Lily Kida.

'A Titan with ties to the Taki dynasty and a distant relative of Blackthorn's own Gym Leader Clair, Miss Kida grew up on Cinnabar Island and retains her position as a paleogeneticist with labs operating out of both Cinnabar and Indigo Plateau. Gym Leader Clair herself commented on the appropriateness of Miss Kida's appointment to the League after revealing that Miss Kida was responsible for the death of the League's previous Champion, Lance of Blackthorn. League rules have always stated that any person who defeats the reigning Champion, either by lawful Pokemon tournament or duel, may accept an automatic nomination to the League as its fourth member...'

The article went on, but Lance could read no more. He was in shock, his thoughts having all but frozen, as memories of *her* face, her voice, those sad eyes returned to him through pouring rain and stormy skies. Reaching for him as the sky fell and smothered him under

leagues of dark ocean, cold and alone.

"Luke? Are you all right?" Aldane asked. "You look pale, even for a mainlander."

He mistook the look of surprise Lance shot him for offense and quailed. "Oh, I mean, I didn't mean nothin' by it. Mainlanders're all a bit pale compared to us islanders."

Lance swallowed, but he tasted only ash on the back of his throat after the bitter strong coffee Chevelle had prepared. "No, it's fine, this news is just...a lot to take in."

Aldane accepted this easily, relieved that he'd not offended the man his boy clearly looked up to. "Of course, after everything you've been through, news o' the world moving on like everything's fine can be hard to swallow. Although, I'm afraid we didn't pick up any other survivors. There were no traces of a ship in those waters. I'm very sorry..."

It took Lance a moment to understand what Aldane was saying. "Yes, of course, I understand. It's...very sad that I was the only survivor."

"Aye, but at least those four made it. I tell you, if I'd known I was helping out a couple members of the new Elite Four, I woulda gotten an autograph for my kids. D'you know they say those four faced Lugia itself? The official story don't say much, but here on the islands we know the old tales. To defeat Lugia, they must've gotten help from the Triumvirate---Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres. No other way t'do it, the stories go. I looked, I tell you, but there weren't no sign of 'em around. They call them the Three Mirages on account o' they're so hard to see, and the ones who do see 'em never really know if it's a trick or not. But the volcano on Fire Island erupted during the storm, so it makes a man wonder..."

Aldane prattled on, but Lance had heard enough. Chevelle returned just as he was heading for the door.

"Oh, you're leaving already? There's more coffee if you'd like it," Chevelle said.

Lance stopped, unclenched his teeth, and plastered a polite smile on his face as he looked back over his shoulder. "Thank you for the hospitality. I really should be heading back to rest. I'm not fully recovered yet."

They accepted that excuse well enough, though Lance did not really care if they might find him a bit brusque in his manner of rushing out of there. He had what he'd come here for, and now he had to deal with it.

He walked alone along the sandy trail towards the beach that would lead to the clinic where he spent his days and nights as he healed. The jungle spilled onto the path deeper inland, and here by

the beaches tall palms blotted out the stars above. The moon was a sliver of a crescent tonight. It was a cool night, pleasant with the heady smell of salt and wildflowers and fruit in the air.

Lily took my place in the Elite Four.

He stood on the beach and stared out to the dark sea beyond. It was such a lovely night, but there was nothing lovely about Lance's black mood.

She took my Dragonite, and now she's taken my place.

A mere *girl*. A Titan for true, he'd acknowledged as much after seeing her control first-hand, but an unrefined one who relied on the borrowed strength of others to win her battles for her. He had not felt the urge to scream so acutely in years. And in an act of madness or weakness or perhaps the freedom masquerading as them, he did just that. A guttural shout, full-bellied and rancorous, escaped his too-white teeth and howled over the black ocean, swept away on the winds and plunged beneath the frothing waves along with the bodies of his lost Pokemon, along with his sanity and pride and even his life, had it not been for Lapras. Had it not been for that accursed Silver Wing that had jettisoned him back to the surface and kept him alive in that cold crushing place even in defeat. The Silver Wing that Lily created.

No one heard his scream, gobbled up by the sea winds and the tide, and no one saw him keel over, clutching his gut as though wounded. He ached as though beaten repeatedly, but this pain had been there all along, bottled up and waiting for the final confirmation of all his failures and what they had led to. He kept his eyes open and gazed skyward over the endless inky sea, alone under the stars. Always alone, ever since his craven father had abandoned him to beg for his own life like a dog. Alone in his genius, for there can only be one champion, only one to be the very best, better than all the rest. Alone here, too, under the vast sky and the stars with their cold fire, selfishly hoarding their warmth and only the dark ocean around to swallow the last of him, of the life he'd lost back on Shamouti Island. Always alone.

"Why is that the only way you can see the world?"

Her words haunted him, just as her likeness had haunted him in his delirium out at sea, drifting in the doldrums, waiting for the death that would not come. She had everything now, everything that used to be his, and she'd never wanted it, as she spitefully declared that day on Shamouti Island. She'd renounced their bloodline, renounced their heritage, renounced his offer to make amends for her stolen childhood when her skuff parents absconded with her in the night. She'd renounced him, and now she had everything she never wanted. And somehow, he was apparently the one with the warped vision of the

world and how things were meant to be, if she could be believed.

Lance panted as he breathed through the adrenaline and the crippling weight of reality that had settled upon him. It was like he'd woken up in an alternate universe, one in which white had become black and night had become day. It was all so wrong, a world he no longer recognized, but even this paranoia and uncertainty would abate with time. Lance had always been a survivor, and he would survive this, too.

But this emptiness in him, this part that was missing, lost at the bottom of the ocean, it would not heal with time. She'd taken it from him when her lowly Dragonair had pierced a hole through his noble Dragonite and killed the only living thing that had always stood by Lance. She'd taken it all, and she'd had the nerve to reach for him only when it was too late. Another trick, perhaps, a final fuck you to a man condemned, forgotten, used up but not yet dead.

A long mournful note drifted to Lance on the wind, beautiful in its melancholy, and he looked up to find Lapras floating in the shallows and watching him with luminous dark eyes. It cocked its head in concern, but he hadn't called it here. Staggering to his feet, Lance waded into the shallows to stand next to Lapras and reached for it. Tentative, Lapras slowly lowered its head towards him and allowed contact.

"I'm not alone!" Lily had declared.

Lance marveled at the feel of Lapras's slick rubbery skin under his fingertips. It watched him like a cornered prey watches a predator approaching, but it didn't bolt or shy much from him. He exhaled, feeling the familiar high of control wash over him, and watched as Lapras's apprehension melted away and the haze of control took over. No need to be afraid, no need to worry, to think, to question. Just let go, and soon it will feel like second nature. This was his entirely.

"I may be alone, but I don't need to rely on others like you did," he said as he patted Lapras's snout. "This... This is mine."

He planned on keeping it that way.

The days passed, and Lance regained his strength and muscle mass that had atrophied under the merciless elements from so long lost at sea. Odane, true to his words, sought him out almost every day for an hour here, an hour there simply to watch him train with Lapras. Lance did not indulge him in conversation much, having never much cared for children himself, but having something to fill the silence was undeniably comforting. So he tolerated the boy. Odane meant no harm, and he was ignorant of Lance's true nature and character.

Lapras was becoming used to Lance more and more every day to the point that he barely needed to exert much control over the beast. Sometimes, Lapras would swim off towards sea, perhaps remembering

that it had a herd out there somewhere missing it, but Lance would always call it back. It happened less and less over time. We do not miss what we no longer remember. And Lance had always had a fondness for Pokemon that he did not feel for people. He was kind to Lapras, as he had been kind to his other Pokemon. His power was all he could rely on, and his Pokemon were the heart of that power. It would not do to endanger that bond.

It had gotten to the point that Lance was physically ready to leave Fairchild Island and rejoin the world, though he had not yet settled on the manner of his resurgence, or even if he would make himself known at all. That first night when he learned of what had happened after his apparent demise, he'd been beside himself with fury and wounded pride and a sense of loss, especially since his supposed killer had taken his place as one of the Elite Four. But now, the wound had healed enough to let him think more clearly about his next move.

He had failed. He had given it his best shot, but he had not accounted for resistance from the four young Tamers that had awakened the Triumvirate and challenged him directly. Hubris, he supposed. A simple oversight. He may be the most powerful Titan on this earth, but there would always be those who would stand up to him. It would not happen again. More importantly, what happened next? He no longer had the Silver Wing with which to awaken Lugia. Team Rocket was finished, and Lance had read that Giovanni's own son had taken command of the broken organization and transformed it into a humanitarian group. There would be no help there. Lorelei, Will, and Karen were all dead courtesy of Lily's friends, he'd also discovered in his research filling in the gaps from his time lost at sea. He was truly on his own.

Did he even want to go back? He was called a terrorist in the papers, a warmonger and a genocidal tyrant. He would not be accepted in common society anymore. Blackthorn was an option. The Elder would probably forgive his transgressions, caring only for power, anyway, and Lance had that in spades even with only one Pokemon left to him. But his mercurial cousin, Clair, had been the first Gym Leader to endorse Lily's nomination to the Elite Four. He had not heard word of any search parties looking for him. As far as Lance was convinced, Clair believed him to be dead and had made a grand show of telling the world how glad she was for it. He would find no help from her or from Blackthorn. Titans would always be the first to turn on other Titans if it suited them, after all.

Perhaps he needed more time, then. He needed a new team and time to train them up, as well as himself. Lapras was one thing, but to achieve the same level of control he had exerted over Lugia again, he would need to get back into practice. A well-sharpened sword could

cut deep, but one neglected would lose its luster and its edge.

He had a thought then as he sat under a fleshy palm chewing on a dried Figy berry in the middle of the languid afternoon. What if he started over? Became somebody else? His plan had been foiled, and with it his team of Dragons. There was not much left to him except Lapras and the memories. What if he began a new life? Surely, with time, he would come up with a new way to achieve his goals to transform the world into a vision of his choosing, a place where people like him could live as they were meant to and be revered without prejudice, a world where orphaned little boys living with the stigma of their parent's sins could find their place, too. He'd reinvented himself once before; he could do it again.

Maybe he'd gone about it wrong, he pondered under the shade as he watched the ocean in the distance. Lapras was swimming in the shallows and spouting water in some kind of game. It was still a rather young Pokemon, and Lance wondered as he watched it. Lorelei had had a Lapras. She'd been a formidable Crystallos, enough that Lance was willing to overlook her personal issues---she'd spent years trying to please Agatha, to become her mentee, but the old woman was as tough as an old boot and nothing was ever good enough for her. Lance had had to endure Lorelei's drunken self-pity on more than one occasion, but it had been worth it to sway her to his side when he decided to join with Team Rocket and enact his master plan. It had been Lorelei who lured Bruno into a false sense of security long enough for Lance to stab him in the back. A Bellator of Bruno's caliber was nearly impossible to sneak up on, let alone engage in close combat. After that, it had been a simple matter of having Lorelei freeze the body and grinding it to fine red dust. No trace left behind. Lorelei was no Titan, but she'd been more than useful to Lance. But Lorelei was dead, as were those scheming Rocket Admins Karen and Will. Still, all had served their purpose. It was Lance who had failed, and he would carry that burden alone, as he always had.

If nothing else, Shamouti had shown him that he was not as untouchable as he'd let the Elder convince him he was. Everyone had a weakness. He just never thought his would be a blonde, five-foot tall *woman*, of all people.

The thought of Lily ended his musings, and he frowned at the still-raw sting of defeat. She must be out there carrying on with her new life blissfully ignorant of his existence. The thought was an interesting one. She probably had no idea that he'd survived, no doubt having imagined he'd perished, as all the papers had claimed. Who could have survived? Certainly no ordinary man.

I am no ordinary man.

What would she think if she knew he'd survived? Would she try to

kill him again? Ah, but this time she would not have a team of legendary birds to assist her, or her friends to lend her their strength. No, if Lance ever saw Lily again, it would be one to one on his terms, he would make sure of it. Imagine the look on her face to find him miraculously back from the dead and ready for her this time...

He put the thought out of his mind. Lily was the last person he wanted to see now after all that had happened. So long as the world believed him to be dead, he would never have to deal with her ilk again. No, he needed to plan, time to regain his former strength. He needed a new team. But before that, he needed a way off this godforsaken island. Lapras could survive on the open ocean, but Lance could not. He needed a ship, but he had washed up without so much as a penny to his name, and he could not reveal his identity to anyone and risk the wrath of the Orange Navy. If he had a full team, it wouldn't matter if he met resistance, but again, he had no team, and not just any Pokemon was worthy of standing beside him. He was a Dragonmaster; he trained Dragons and their descendants. Nothing else was worthy of his time and attention.

As Lance mulled over this quandary in circles, he was a bit slow to notice the frantic footsteps running in his direction and the familiar voice calling his name. Except, it wasn't his name, and it took him a moment to understand.

"Mister Luke!" Odane the skinny local boy called to him. He stopped and bent over his knees to catch his breath. From the looks of him, the boy had run clear across the island to find him.

"Odane," Lance said, setting down his fruit.

"Mister Luke, you gotta come quick!" Odane said between gasping breaths. "The fire, it's spreading!"

Lance frowned. "Fire?"

Odane nodded emphatically. He was drenched in sweat, and now that Lance had a moment to look him over, he noticed that the boy's face was smeared with soot and grime. He stank of smoke. "Over... Over at the...the Miltank farms!" Odane said through gasping breaths.

"If there's a fire, then the fire department should put it out. I'm not a firefighter," Lance said dismissively.

"They're there, but it's..." He paused to suck in a big gulp of air. "It's the pests, they're back! Oh, I gotta help Mama! Our Miltank's there, too, and you're a trainer! You just gotta help! Hurry!" Odane grabbed Lance's hand before he could pull out of reach and tugged.

Lance was ready to yank his hand back and snap at the young boy. This was his time to be alone, to think, and Odane had already bothered him enough earlier this morning when the boy played with Lapras in the bay and took away time from training. But there were tears in his normally laughing eyes, and fear that Lance recognized

easily. Odane was never fazed by Lance's quietly cold demeanor, never scared off or put off, but something had really rattled him now. Against Lance's better judgment, he got to his feet and let Odane pull him towards the path north that led deeper into the island. He quickly recalled Lapras to its Pokeball.

"C'mon!" Odane said, breaking into a jog and pulling Lance along behind him.

"All right, all right, let go. I can walk on my own."

Lance jogged after Odane. After many days of rest and healing, he was almost back to his usual self. It still felt strange to run, and the heat of Fairchild Island was humid and sticky. He was soon sweating and his borrowed shirt stuck to his back. His red hair fell into his eyes, weighed down by the humidity, and he brushed it from his face with the back of a hand.

The heat soon turned vicious as they came upon the site of the fire Odane had described. It was madness. A couple of the many large Miltank farms that were the heart of the island's trade economy were burning, and the rancid smells of smoldering green wood and grass and cooked flesh were redolent in the thick air. The Fairchild Fire Department was already on the scene with a multitude of Water Pokemon, from tiny Squirtle to five-foot Kingler, blasting Water Guns and Bubble Beams at the fires, working desperately to put them out. Black smoke rose in twining columns, buffeted west on a strong wind higher up, giving the place an ominous look like so many black tornadoes reaching down from the vengeful heavens above. But it was not the heavens that acted on their vengeance today; it was Charizard. An entire flock of wild Charizard, about fourteen in total.

They rained orange streams of deadly fire upon the scrambling Miltank running for shelter, roasting them as they ran, and then swooped down for the kill. The Charizard were too small to carry off their kills, so they were forced to rip into the roasted cows, fly off with chunks of seared meat in their smoking jaws, and repeat the process. All the while, the police department had deployed Pokemon and trained officers to fight them off. There were Poliwrath that attacked the feeding Charizard when they landed and Fearow to attack them in the skies. Growlithe and Arcanine spewed more fire at the circling Dragons while herding the frightened Miltank to safety. Islanders working the farms were running for their lives. Some were trapped amidst the blaze, and the police department trainers did their best to cut through the flames to help them.

"Mama!" Odane shouted as he ran to the fire.

Lance yanked him back by the shoulder without thinking about it. "If you go in there, you'll burn to death."

"But Mama went in there! Our Miltank's in trouble!" Odane

protested. "Please, help her, Mister Luke!"

Why should he help these people? They were nothing, beneath him. Mere thralls living in their backwater paradise ignorant of the world and its wonders beyond their shores. He owed them nothing. Sure, they had taken him in and let him recover here, but that was their decision. They could have left him for dead. He would have in their position. And what kind of people did not have adequate protection from the elements and foraging Pokemon? Charizard were known to roam wild in the Orange Islands, but much farther south on the remote Golden Island. It was odd to see them here in Fairchild, Lance admitted to himself. Even so, it was their own fault, he reasoned stubbornly.

A Charizard's Flamethrower hit the ground mere yards in front of Lance and Odane, and the searing heat on Lance's face was almost unbearable. He staggered back and shoved Odane behind him, shielding the boy with his body. Odane was crying, and others were screaming and shouting in the mayhem.

The fire will spread if this is left to continue, Lance thought to himself.

Fine. He released Lapras, who called out in distress at emerging in the middle of the sauna the Charizard had transformed the farmland into.

"Put out as much of the fire as you can," Lance commanded.

Lapras was spooked and in unfamiliar territory, but it obeyed and sprayed thick spouts of water before it, dousing whatever fires had broken out in the vicinity. But it was not enough. The Charizard continued to circle like hungry Honchkrow, working together to corral the Miltank into one spot so they could roast them all in one shot. Police trainers had begun to fire large steel-tipped harpoons at the Charizard. One was hit in the belly and went down with a blood-curdling wail, but the others were fast and hard to hit with such large weapons. Odane tugged on Lance's pant leg, reduced to inconsolable sobbing as the shock of what was happening paralyzed him. Lance gritted his teeth, not liking the idea that came to mind as he watched the circling Charizard. One dove and attacked a Miltank whose buttocks had caught fire, sinking its teeth into the haunches as the large cow bleated in terror and ran straight into a wall of fire. Lance shook his head. There was no other choice. He had to count on the islanders' ignorance and the distraction of the conflagration to help him now.

He grabbed Odane's wrist and pulled him off. "Stay here," he ordered.

"But!" Odane looked more terrified than he'd ever looked before.

"Stay," Lance said more forcefully before running towards the

burning fields.

The air was so thick here that he lapsed into a coughing fit as he weaved between the fires. He had to cover his mouth and nose, but the smoke was persistent and made his eyes water. He ran past the battling Water Pokemon and their trainers, and someone actually tried to yank him back by the elbow. He shoved the interloper away---a young woman in a fire department uniform---and pressed on. When he came as close to the huddled Miltank as he dared to go without risking the wall of flames flanking them, he stopped and squinted skyward. The air was shimmering with heat, and he was lightheaded from the smoke. But he reached for the heavens with a hand and concentrated with all his focus on reaching the Charizard. The familiar rush of control swelled his veins and quickened his blood, the Old Blood of the original Dragon Tamers that flowed particularly strong in him. Like spider webs, he felt his fingers brush against the bellies of the circling Charizard with invisible threads, tugging and calling to a power long dormant in them. They, too, had once been Dragons.

"Stop," he said, blinking away the tears drawn by the smoke stinging his eyes. "Stop this now!"

The Charizard roared, their movements growing erratic as they felt the strange pull from one who could surely only be an enemy. After so many weeks out of commission, Lance found that he had trouble commanding all the Charizard, and the realization sickened him. He, who had once commanded the legendary Lugia had fallen this far in his defeat. It was unconscionable. He would not abide it.

I am the Dragonmaster! I am the best there ever was! I will not lose!

"Leave!" he bellowed, finding his voice through the asphyxiating smoke. "I command you to leave this place, Charizard!"

The Charizard roared, a booming chorus as they fought him, fought his gravity, but he could feel them slipping. They snapped at each other, unsure how to resist this foreign urge to go against their very instincts, but there was no resisting Lance. Dragons cannot defy a fully-realized Titan, no matter how hard they try. The wind changed, and the Charizard swarm turned south en masse, abandoning their conquest. Blue wings beat the sky and carried them away as a unit, leaving the fire department Pokemon to put out the rest of the fires without having to worry about the Charizard starting more. Roasting Miltank entrails and half-eaten carcasses, still smoking and burning, lay strewn among the ashes. Some unfortunate islanders, farmers and rescue trainers alike who had gotten caught up in the conflagration, lay burning and smoking, hardly recognizable. The flies had already begun to descend, and the telltale squawk of carrion birds was not far behind. People cried and shouted their relief, amazed that the Charizard just turned around and left for seemingly no reason.

Lance lowered his hand and stared at it, sooty and sweaty from all the smoke. He was a mess, but he had not felt so invigorated since before he washed up here. He could feel the power coursing through his veins, growing in magnitude, settling in to stay. It had never left him, and now it was his to command again. He could have laughed.

Someone's scream drew his attention. The Charizard that had been bolder than the rest and attacked a Miltank just before Lance sent them all away was still here, feasting among the embers on its kill. It had ripped open Miltank's belly, and each Fire Fanged bite roasted Miltank's innards before Charizard gobbled them up. Its orange snout was bloody, and bits of cooked flesh were stuck between its jagged teeth. Mean yellow eyes looked about suspiciously, and its lash-like tail slashed the air and left smoky arcs---a warning to anyone looking to approach.

A police officer and his Arcanine were the first to approach Charizard. Arcanine barked in warning, but Charizard had hunkered down behind its prize and glared at Arcanine. When the big dog got too close, Charizard roared and spat out a stream of Flamethrower that incinerated the grassy ground, forcing Arcanine to backtrack and protect its trainer. A couple police officers were setting up another harpoon arrow to gut the remaining Charizard from a safe distance.

But Lance was not about to let them do something so stupid. He strode purposefully towards the lone Charizard over the protests of the Arcanine trainer.

"Hey, you! Stop, it's dangerous!"

Lance ignored him and held out a hand towards Charizard. The great beast saw him coming and hissed menacingly, black smoke rising from its jaws. But as soon as it felt Lance's pull, its pupils dilated and it rose to its full height, an impressive ten feet at the horns. It glared down at Lance over its nose, haughty and important.

"Your flock abandoned you, Charizard. You're all alone," Lance said. "I know the feeling."

Charizard snarled, and embers dripped from its jaws, singing the ground below. Lance remembered another Charizard he'd faced not so long ago, the one that had dared to stand against Dragonite and ended up ripped in half. It had been fearless, and very stupid. Charizard were not true Dragons; they could never hope to measure up to the real thing. But Lance was a Dragonmaster, the greatest that had ever lived. The rules did not apply to him.

"Perhaps I'll make you into a true Dragon," Lance said.

Charizard snapped its jaws, and he could feel it fighting him like hell. The Old Blood was strong in this one. A true Dragon bowed to no master. Lance retrieved a Pokeball from his pocket.

"But first, we're getting off this island." He snapped open the

Pokeball, and Charizard disappeared in a flash of red light within it. The release button blinked a couple times before falling dark. The Pokeball radiated warmth in Lance's palm, and he pocketed it once more.

When he turned back, he found a number of people staring at him. The two policemen with their harpoon had stopped working and gaped openly. The Arcanine trainer was watching him with a mixture of incredulity and suspicion.

"It was him," someone said. "He sent the Charizard away."

"But how?"

"What did he do?"

"He's the stranger, the one who washed up here a few weeks ago, isn't he?"

"He saved us!" Odane exclaimed. The skinny boy ran through the gathered crowd, tear tracks cutting clean paths down his dirty face. "Mister Luke saved us!"

Murmurs grew among the gathered islanders.

"If he hadn't been here, the farms would all be burned."

"Our Miltank are okay because of him..."

"How did he do it?"

"Who cares! The boy's right, we're saved!"

The whispers turned to full-on chatter, and soon Lance found himself surrounded by grateful islanders. He didn't really hear them and was unable to fight the river of movement that swept him away from the danger zone. A familiar face was among them---Chevelle, Odane's mother. She shooed some of the others away and took Lance's elbow.

"Don't you mind them," Chevelle said. Her dress was charred in places, and her arm was in a sling splotched with blood. "You go get cleaned up. There's the clinic nurses just there, see?"

The islanders had all come together to put out the remaining fires, tend to the wounded Miltank and each other, and clean up the mess. Like Durant summoned from their nest, they scurried into action. Hands touched Lance's arms and shoulders and face as he passed, faces tearful and smeared with soot and laughing and sobbing and silently grateful.

"I don't know how you did it," Chevelle said, "but those Charizard're all gone somehow. And my boy's safe because of you."

"I didn't..." Lance trailed off, not sure how to respond. He couldn't very well tell her the truth or deny it if she figured it out.

Chevelle shook her head. "Here in the islands, we give thanks to what the sea and sky give to us. Sometimes they give us terrible storms or pests that burn our farms, and sometimes they give us something better." She touched his shoulder and smiled. "You have

done a good thing, Luke. That is all that matters to us."

Odane was all smiles again now that his mother was safe and the excitement was over. "Wow, you caught that Charizard! But why? They're s'posed to be pests and hard to train! Why'd you do it? Mister Luke, you're the coolest! That's it, Mama, I decided. I wanna be a trainer like Mister Luke!" He babbled on and on, giving no time to answer any of his questions.

Lapras found Lance and lowered its head towards him. Its skin was slick with condensation from all the heat. It would need to get back in the water soon. He recalled it to its Pokeball and spun it around Charizard's in the palm of his hand.

"What're you gonna do now, huh?" Odane asked as a nurse saw to his cuts and abrasions. "Are you gonna train that Charizard?"

Lance examined the two Pokeballs in his hand. "Yes, I am. But I can't do it here."

"What? You're leaving? But you can't! You gotta help me become a Pokemon trainer, just like you!"

"Odane," Chevelle scolded her son. "Mister Luke is an adult, and he must have people he wants to see back home. Don't you be selfish, now. And you know you can't be a Pokemon trainer. You'll join the Orange Navy when you're older, just like your father."

Odane looked abashed. "Mister Luke? You got somebody you really miss back home?"

I have no home, Lance thought. *It's her home now.*

"Where'll you go?" Odane pressed.

Lance looked towards the northern coast beyond the jungle. Heat rose from the earth where the swarm of Charizard had set ablaze the grazing grasses and palms.

"Far from here," he said at length. "To a place where I can begin again."

To a place where only the strong can survive.

Dolores was among the nurses tending to the wounded, and she called Chevelle over to help her with a man who could not walk on his own, leaving Odane alone with Lance.

"Mister Luke?" Odane said in a small voice. "Are you really gonna leave?"

Lance looked down at the boy as though seeing him for the first time. He was such a skinny boy, lean and bony and completely ordinary, just the son of a thrall who would grow up to follow in his father's unremarkable footsteps, as his mother had reminded him. Lance had a Charizard now, a happy change of fortune, and if Odane had not dragged him here to help, things would be very different right now. Hesitating just a moment, Lance fished a spare Pokeball from his pocket and held it out for Odane to take.

"You are your father's son," he said, "but your life is your own. It doesn't belong to anyone but you." He put the empty Pokeball in Odane's dirty hand and closed the boy's fingers around it. "So live."

Odane stared at the Pokeball that was large enough to fill his small hands as though he'd been given a precious jewel. It was the last one Lance had on his person. He'd found them collecting dust in a drawer at the clinic while he was organizing papers for Dolores. Perhaps it would have been prudent to hold onto it, but once he was back on the mainland, he could get access to funds he kept hidden away and procure better models, Great Balls and Ultra Balls. But to Odane, a boy who'd known only the mundane life of his parents and their parents before them, the Pokeball was a treasure beyond measure. He began to weep silently, but he clutched the ball to his chest and stuck out his jaw stubbornly.

"I'll become a great trainer one day, you'll see," he vowed. "I'll be just like you, Mister Luke. I'll help a lotta people!"

Lance rose to his full height. Odane was so small, but he looked very determined through his tears. "Goodbye, Odane."

Lance turned to leave, already formulating a plan in his head. He needed only to retrieve a small bag of belongings from the clinic, clean up a bit, and raid the kitchen cabinets for food enough to get him to Hamlin Island to the north. It would be too risky to stop in Cinnabar, where he would surely be recognized. Then, from Hamlin he would go farther north until there was nowhere left to go. A place to begin anew, a place where only the strong survived. Lance was the strongest of the them all, and he had survived this long. Charizard would get him the rest of the way.

Chapter 2

The somber halls of the Indigo Keep were dark and drafty on this late summer night. Guards on the night shift manned the ramparts of the castle and warmed their hands over signal fires as they kept watch on the Silver Mountains to the north. The darkness had a touch of melancholy about it this far north in Kanto, so far removed from the rest of the continent. Not many had traveled north of the Silver Mountains, home to Kanto and Johto's strongest wild Pokemon. Those who did almost never returned.

But the Indigo Keep was quiet tonight, its halls watched closely by Rangers employed by the Elite Four to keep the peace in Indigo Plateau and in the lower continents alike. Within these walls, the beasts of the north had no power as long as the Elite Four were around to make it so. One such anointed keeper of the peace was asleep in her large bed alone, tossing and turning as she groaned and saw visions in her head she would have rather forgotten long ago.

With a gasp, Lily jerked awake in bed. For one horrifying second, it was pitch black and she could not see, could not breathe. She gripped her throat, expecting it to constrict as salt water filled it to bursting and pulled her deeper into a dark ocean of her own making. But after a moment, she managed to suck in a breath and collapsed back onto the bed, her skinny arms giving out under her.

A female Pikachu, previously curled up at Lily's feet, woke from its slumber when she stirred and now peered down at her, squeaking incessantly and wagging its bushy tail in worry. Lily sucked in a few gasping breaths, afraid this was just a hallucination and she was in fact sinking to the bottom of that dark ocean to fathoms unseen. But Pikachu's yellow fur was short and coarse and sparked with static electricity when she ran her hand down the rodent's back.

"ChuChu," Lily said, out of breath.

Pikachu nuzzled her neck. Lily wiped her long sleeve over her clammy forehead and tried to calm her breathing. Her throat still ached from the phantom drowning, the same dream that had visited her these past eight months since it happened. Nowadays, though, she saw the dream almost every night. Often, it was so vivid that she was afraid to go back to sleep. Tonight was one of those nights.

Lily sat up in bed again, slowly this time, and pushed her long blonde hair out of her eyes. Her bangs were damp with sweat, and her shirt collar was moist to the touch. Pikachu squeaked again and perched on its hind legs on the plush comforter.

"Sorry I woke you up," Lily said, smiling tiredly.

She let her hand fall on the pillow next to hers, but it was cold and

hadn't been slept on for weeks. Her smile fell, and a fresh wave of aching exhaustion swept through her like a strong winter wind. Alone in the darkness, Lily let herself lean into that unused pillow and hugged it close. She breathed deeply, searching for any lingering trace of Ash's scent. But the maids were diligent in their duties and had changed the sheets just a couple days ago. The only smell on this pillow was of fresh linen and soap from a recent washing.

Pikachu hopped over her curled up body and nudged her again in the head. Lily cracked open a tired eye and stared up at the insistent rodent. "I know," she whispered. "I just wanted to pretend he was here. Just for a moment."

Pikachu looked at her with what could have passed for sympathy. Maybe it understood a little of Lily's plight, having lost its mate the same day Ash left and took his Pikachu with him. It seemed Lily and her Pikachu were sharing this bed alone together. Sighing, Lily put the cold pillow back and slipped out of bed.

Her travel pack, packed the night before, sat on a stand zipped up and ready for transport. She glanced at it briefly before heading for the bathroom and flicking on the light, Pikachu in tow. The girl looking back at her in the mirror over the white marble sink looked far older than her barely twenty-one years. Her blonde hair was in tangles and brittle, almost dehydrated, as it hung long and limp around her shoulders and brushed the small of her back. Dark circles under her eyes had become a nearly permanent feature, both from the nightmares and the late nights in her lab.

Lily leaned forward over the sink to get a better look at herself. So much had changed over the last couple years of her life, and it reflected back in her amber eyes that were narrower than she'd ever thought to notice before...before all this. Her cheekbones were high on her face but unusually angular if she tilted her head just so. She ran a tongue over her teeth, pausing over the long incisors just a little too sharp to be quite human. Despite the dark circles and etiolated pallor, her skin shone with a reptilian sleekness that made her shiver just to look upon.

Domadraghi. Titan. *Dragon Tamer.*

Ever since she had been told what she really was, where she came from, it had become impossible not to see it staring back at her from the other side of the mirror, like another version of her that was slowly taking over. Lily stared unblinkingly at her reflection, letting her mind wander. She had a sudden vision of her looking-glass self reaching through the mirror to strangle her, and all of a sudden her throat clenched up again, rushing water filling her ears, and when she closed her eyes she saw the world falling away above her as the dark ocean dragged her down to its murky depths.

And him, reaching out a hand to her. Offering, as he watched her drown.

"You could stay with me..."

He was always there in her nightmares, just as he had been there the day it had all become real. Lance the Dragonmaster, the former Champion of Kanto and Johto, the Prince of Blackthorn turned terrorist until Lily and her allies had put a stop to him and his monster.

"He's gone," Ash had reassured her when they spoke about what had happened behind closed doors. "We all saw him get crushed when Lugia fell. No one could survive that, not even him."

Lily had wanted to believe him and told him as much.

"So believe it!" Ash had said with a smile as he tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear that had come loose from her ponytail. "Lance is gone, and he's never coming back."

"He's gone," Lily told her reflection in the mirror, echoing Ash's past words to her.

But they never found his body.

Her reflection stared back at her, a knowing glint in its reptilian amber eye like it knew her traitorous thought.

If they never found a body, then they could never really confirm his death.

Lily's reflection grinned, and Lily pulled back from the mirror, a hand over her mouth. She blinked rapidly as her stomach turned like she'd free fallen from the tallest tower of the Indigo Keep. Her reflection mimicked her every move, just as shocked and freaked out as she was. Pikachu jumped up onto the counter and pawed at her chest.

"I'm not getting enough sleep," Lily said, composing herself. She rubbed her bleary eyes, chalking her misplaced paranoia up to the lingering effects of her recurring nightmare. "I need coffee."

Pikachu cocked its head cutely, and Lily smiled and scratched it behind the ears. She pushed the disturbing thoughts of the battle eight months ago out of her mind and set to work on her morning ablutions. It was still dark outside, just shy of five in the morning, and she wasn't due to catch the S.S. Anne until later in the day. Plenty of time to reach the Pallet Town harbor with Dodrio's speed. The three-headed dodo bird could run from Indigo Plateau to Pallet Town in just under four hours.

Lily hummed to herself as she dressed, feeling less tired and dejected from her compounded exhaustion now that she had washed up and was looking forward to her impending trip to Cinnabar Island, her former hometown before she became a member of the new Elite Four.

"One day, when Tiny evolves into Dragonite, we'll be able to Fly all the way to Cinnabar from here in just one day and one night," Lily said to Pikachu as the Electric rodent waited while she changed for the day. "Wouldn't that be great, ChuChu?"

Pikachu squeaked happily and released a few stray sparks from its red cheeks. Lily laughed.

"Yeah. Too bad it takes years for Dragonair to evolve. Oh well, Dody's pretty fast, too."

She finished changing into her traveling leathers and linens and pulled her hair back in her trademark ponytail. Then, she went to the windows and pulled back the heavy curtains. The sun was not yet up and it was still quite dark outside. It would be best to wait until first light to wake Dodrio and start the journey south. The moon was just a sliver of a crescent, but as usual, millions of stars poked through the nightscape over Indigo Plateau. This far north, the light pollution characteristic of most human settlements in Kanto was nonexistent.

Even the town surrounding the Indigo Keep was sleepy and quiet, a true mountain hamlet that just happened to be home to the Elite Four, Kanto and Johto's named protectors and among the stronger Pokemon trainers around. Lily sometimes could not believe she had been selected to serve in the group---surely there were others with years' more experience than her. But tradition dictated that overthrowing the previous Champion was nothing short of a guaranteed spot in the group and all the responsibilities that came with it.

The responsibilities were far more than she had expected coming into this. Not only was she responsible for the safety of both Johto and Kanto as the ultimate defense against any feral Pokemon that migrated south from the Silver Mountains, but she was also a peacekeeper between the two continents' powerful Gym Leaders. Often this meant playing judge, jury, and executioner in territorial disputes, communal services, and squabbles over funding.

She was not alone, of course. Ash was the heart and soul of the new Elite Four. He had been the driving inspiration behind many of the new Elite Four's innovations in the lower continents, specifically involving more collaboration and coordination between the Johto and Kanto Gym Leaders. Lt. Surge, formerly of Vermillion City in Kanto, brought the military experience and pedigree both Ash and Lily lacked. And Chuck of Cianwood City in Johto rounded out the group as the unanimously elected Johto representative with decades of leadership experience in the civilian world that Surge lacked.

As for Lily, she was the scientist. She was the face of Kanto's scientific community after Professor Samuel Oak had tragically passed, murdered by one of the former Elite Four. She had the

position and the power to put Kanto's research labs on the map to compete with giants like Devon Corporation in Hoenn, the non-profit Aether Corporation in distant Alola, and the mysterious but indisputably prolific Galactic Enterprises in Sinnoh far to the north. There had never been a scientist in the Elite Four in Kanto and Johto, and on her bad days, Lily sometimes wondered if that had been Gym Leader Blaine's motivation in throwing his support behind her nomination. It was no secret that Blaine's Cinnabar Labs were the premier research institution in Kanto, and having a former employee as one of the new Elite Four had been great for funding prospects and reputation.

But the politics of it all did not concern her. Chuck and Surge were better equipped to deal with that aspect of the job with their years of experience and qualifications. Lily was in a position to do the research she deemed important and to let the world know about it. She could do more now than she had ever dreamed she would do, and if it meant she could help even one more person or Pokemon, then it was worth the hassle and the difficulties. That had been the deal when she agreed to keep a part-time presence at Cinnabar Labs for funding purposes: she would go along with the pomp and pandering for PR purposes as long as she was given free rein to use Cinnabar Labs' resources for her own projects and take a team back to Indigo Plateau.

With her newfound position, Lily had succeeded in advancing Cinnabar Labs' paleogenetics program to include the successful revival of the first Kabuto the world had seen in millennia. The first egg that hatched into a healthy Kabuto was now under Violet's care. Lily had gifted the prehistoric shellfish to Violet personally. She was a talented Syreni hailing from Cerulean City and Surge's wife, and she had promised to keep Lily informed of Kabuto's growth and progression and to let her examine the armored shellfish whenever Violet was in Indigo Plateau with Surge.

Now, Lily would be heading back to Cinnabar to make the final breakthrough on the project that had been her highest priority when she had accepted the mantle of the Elite Four. The cure for Blaine's illness was just within her grasp, and Lily was sure she was on the verge of a major breakthrough any day now. But most of her research and the equipment she needed was back on Cinnabar, as was her intended patient, so she needed to head back.

But Blaine was not the only one who could benefit from the cure to his insidious disease. Eight months ago before confronting Lance on Shamouti Island, Lily had discovered Blaine's greatest secret---the genetic experiment known as Mewtwo. Blaine had created the Pokemon using DNA harvested from the mythical Pokemon Mew, but Mewtwo was born with a disease it had spread to Blaine out of spite

for keeping it locked up in a volcano as a slave to Cinnabar's national security. A powerful Psychic, Mewtwo was nonetheless imprisoned like an animal and treated little better, while the people of Cinnabar enjoyed its protection from disaster, both natural and manmade. Mewtwo had protected Cinnabar when Giovanni, the former leader and founder of the now-defunct international crime syndicate Team Rocket, had induced a cataclysmic eruption. Mewtwo had become Blaine's personal weapon of mass destruction as well as the source of his impending mortality.

If Lily did not find a cure soon, both would perish. And so, she had promised both Blaine and herself that she would find such a cure. Mewtwo did not ask to be born, nor did it deserve to be thrown in a cage and used as a weapon stripped of its identity as a living breathing creature. Blaine was a brilliant scientist, but science was only as good or as bad as the person wielding it.

Lily stood looking out into the darkness over the Silver Mountains, thinking of what awaited her back on Cinnabar. This time, for sure, she would arrive at the cure that had eluded Blaine all these years. Pikachu hopped onto her shoulder and nuzzled her ear affectionately.

"Okay, I'm ready, ChuChu. Let's get some breakfast."

She headed downstairs to the kitchen, passing by closed doors that led to smaller guest rooms, conference rooms, and the like. She and Ash had explored the castle from top to bottom after they relocated here, turning it into a bit of a game of who could memorize the layout first. It had been a boring but necessary task turned fun once Ash took it a step further as a roleplaying game, pretending he was some grand duke from three hundred years ago commenting on the tapestries and the state of the curtains. This wool was much too cheap (look at those fraying ends!), and that carpet had been a bribe from a great lord from Goldenrod to keep the secret of his infidelity with his wife's handmaiden, Ash would say. Lily had laughed until her sides ached hearing him try to mimic a stuffy noble's voice, poorly at that.

Their fun had lasted until they came across a door hidden away in the northern tower that was locked. Lily tried all the keys on the ring the head Ranger, Jonathan, had given her, but none of them worked. Ash tried forcing the door, but it was iron-wrought and wouldn't budge. The corridor and stairwell were too narrow for Snorlax to bust it down, and any other concentrated blast of energy from Dragonair or Ash's Blastoise could damage whatever lay on the other side. Gengar and Mismagius could pass through it, but they could not open the door from inside. Lily had asked Jonathan about it, but he said he didn't have the key to that door. No one did. For as long as he could remember, it had been sealed shut, and everyone had forgotten about it.

She passed the corridor leading to the northern tower on her way downstairs, pausing to look down the length of it. The wooden door at the end led to that winding staircase and the iron door at the top that wouldn't open. One day she'd get a locksmith in here to figure out how to open it, if it wasn't fused shut. Hunger tickled at her stomach now, so she put the thought out of her mind and headed for the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Lily rummaged through the fridge for jam and butter to spread over toast. Setting everything out on the marble counter, she then switched gears to get the coffee going, but stared in confusion at the already brewed pot. Her mind, still sluggish from compounded sleepless nights, took a moment to process.

"You're up at the ass crack of dawn," a gruff voice said somewhere behind her.

Lily jumped and whirled to find Surge at the kitchen table with a newspaper and a half-drunk mug of black coffee. "Oh my gosh, you scared me."

Pikachu scampered over the hardwood floor and hopped onto Surge's lap. It nuzzled his chest and sparked with static electricity, but Surge scratched the plump rodent behind the ears like he didn't mind the jolt. His stainless steel walking cane leaned against the table, a permanent remnant of his near-death experience during the Siege of Saffron. Lily's gaze lingered on the vicious scar that bisected his stubbly face, an old wound from an old life before her time. Surge leveled her with a penetrating stare like every bit of her disappointed him.

"You should be more aware of your surroundings, kid." He paused as he continued to survey her. "You look like hell. Can't sleep?"

Lily yawned. "Yeah. It's nothing, just a bad dream. Um, you want another cup?" She reached for his mug before he could respond, but he grunted his approval anyway.

Lily poured them both fresh cups of steaming coffee and brought the toast and spreads to the table with two plates and knives. Surge helped himself to a slice of toast but didn't butter it.

"Off to Cinnabar today?" he asked, though he already knew she'd planned to go.

Pikachu curled up in his lap to nap, and Lily smiled a little. Pikachu loved Surge in a way it would never love Lily. Surge was a Fulmen, and his aura drew Electric Pokemon in like others could not. She was almost jealous, but not enough to let it get to her. Surge had been a big help when baby Pichu was born and Ash and Lily had no idea how to handle the supercharged rodent. It was better for everyone that they all got along, Lily decided. And Surge was a likeable guy in his own rough way. Ash considered him his personal

hero.

"Yeah. I'm gonna find that cure for sure this time," Lily said.

Surge sipped his coffee. "If you say so." He passed her the paper. "You heard of this guy? Professor Augustine Sycamore. Some hippie from Kalos. Says he published some paper about Mega Evolution, and now everyone's lost their balls over it."

Lily scanned the headline. "Mega Evolution? What's that?"

Surge shrugged. "It ain't evolution, that's for damn sure. It's only temporary. This quack Professor claims any Tamer can achieve it, but only some Pokemon can. What do you say to that?"

Lily quickly skimmed the article. "Wow, this is incredible. It says here that Mega Evolved Pokemon are a lot stronger than regular Pokemon, even ones that're fully evolved." She set down the paper. "A Pokemon stronger than a Dragonite? That'd be amazing!"

Surge grunted. "Thought you'd appreciate that."

"You don't believe it?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. People say they've done it. Mostly in Kalos, but nobody fucking goes to Kalos."

Lily thought about that. "Like, famous people?"

Surge studied her a moment. "I heard your old pal Steven Stone can do it. And there's a woman from Sinnoh, one of their Imperial Generals, who can do it. Cynthia somethin' or other. S'posed to be a bitch of a Ground Adamantine, like none you ever saw before."

He made a face and downed the rest of his piping hot coffee. Fulmen famously detested Ground Adamantines, the only Tamers who could absorb their lethal Electric attacks as well as they could.

"Steven?" Lily said. "Wow, that's new. He didn't mention it back in Saffron. Well, not that he would. We were sort of under attack, hah... I wonder how he's doing?"

Surge chuckled. "Knowing him, he's not dead yet. Rest assured."

Lily was still reading through the article. "Oh hey! It says Professor Sycamore worked closely with a Titan!" Lily looked up, eyes wide and full of wonder. "So that means Titans can use Mega Evolution, too!"

"Why the fuck not?"

So cool!

Lily bit back a smile and continued to read. As she got to the end, though, her smile faded. "Oh. The Titan Professor Sycamore worked with had a Charizard."

Surge sensed her discomfort and gently took the paper back. "Lots of people train Charizard."

Lily wiped her nose and nodded. "Right, you're right. Sorry."

She busied herself by stuffing some toast in her mouth, and her stomach rumbled. The coffee went down hot and potent, and she was thankful for its fast work on her nebulous sleep-deprived mind.

"He'll come back," Surge said after a moment.

"Huh? Oh." Lily forced a smile. "Yeah, I know."

"No, I mean, he'll figure out his shit and then come back when he's ready. The kid always was a stubborn piece o' work."

Lily stared at a crack in the wooden table and picked it with her fingernail. "He's been gone a month. A month in Mt. Silver by himself. I know Ash's strong, but even he---"

"He'll come back," Surge interrupted her, dark eyes steady and sure like he had all the answers. "When he's ready."

Lily said nothing. Ash had said as much when he left, promising her that he would return to his duties, to his post, and to her.

"Someone who knows me pretty well once said there's never gonna be a last battle for me," Ash had confided to Lily as they lay together in the bed he hadn't shared with her for the past month.

"But Team Rocket's finished, and so's the old Elite Four," Lily had reminded him. "What's next?"

"I dunno. But I think... I know that's why I have to do this. What I am... Being a Medium, it's just... I dunno anything about it at all."

Lily smiled sadly. "I know the feeling."

He kissed her hand. "I know. You know better than anyone. But with me... With Gengar and Mismagius... I dunno, it's just different. They're a part of me, you know? It's not just that they listen to me or they like me, like your Dragons. They're part of me," he repeated. "Agatha told me Mediums're made. So, who made me? Why? What's it mean? I don't think I'm special," he added quickly. "But...sometimes I'm afraid I'm in trouble. Not, like, cursed or something stupid like that! More like...marked, or like I've got a target on my back. I can't explain it. It's just this feeling I get sometimes, like I think I'm alone, but then I get this feeling like I'm not. Ah, I'm not makin' any sense, huh?"

Lily loved that goofy smile of his, and she loved the feel of it against her lips when she kissed him under the cover of darkness in the bed they shared. "I don't really get it, but I think that's sort of the point, right?" she said. "You should go, do what you need to do. I know I could never understand, but I know what it's like to find out you're not who you thought you were. Um, does that make sense?"

Ash laughed and hugged her close. She loved the way he ran his fingers through her hair and tugged at it lightly. "You make perfect sense to me. I love that about you."

Lily blushed and buried her face in the crook of his neck, warm as he kissed her head.

"I love *you*, you know?" he'd whispered so only she would hear it.

Lily warmed her hands around her mug of coffee, the memory fading with the steam vapors that rose from her mug. She pulled the

cup closer to her, holding onto the memories as long as she could.

"I miss him," she said without really meaning to.

Surge studied her silently. He had a prickly mien and was generally unpleasant around everyone, especially when he thought someone had fucked up, which was most of the time. Lily had seen him get into a number of screaming matches with Violet, though Violet usually won and he walked away grumbling and in a perpetual bad mood having to go along with whatever she had decided. Ash was usually on the receiving end of Surge's rudeness, but he took it in stride and made no secret of his admiration for the old Lieutenant. Chuck didn't even seem to notice Surge's trademark abrasiveness, finding most everything in life a wonderful joke and always finding an opportunity to laugh.

With Lily, Surge was an entirely different animal.

"You can miss him," he said, "but you don't need him. Not for your little science projects, not to be one of the Elite Four, and definitely not as a Titan. You remember that, and you 'n me won't have any problems. Got that?"

Lily looked up and had the sudden urge to cry and smile like a buffoon and hug Surge. Knowing he would probably have an aneurysm if she tried to hug him, she settled for a bright and teary smile. "I got it."

Surge nodded and got up. He picked up Pikachu by the scruff of her neck and set her on the table like a used napkin, but the little rodent took it in stride and rolled into a standing position on her hind legs. Surge retrieved his cane and leaned his weight on it.

"When're you getting back?"

"I'm planning on a two-week trip," Lily said. "But I'll send a bird if anything changes."

"Hm. Violet's in Cerulean with Misty for the rest of the month. You keep it to two weeks and I'll give you 'n your Ampharos and Pikachu a full day's training when you get back."

Lily beamed. Surge was a master Electric-type Pokemon trainer, and now that she happened to have two on her team, she had been begging him for some tips on how best to approach battling with them as a pair. He always had some excuse or other being just as busy as she was.

"I'll do my best," she promised. "Does this mean you'll miss me around here?"

Surge scowled. "The sooner you get back here, the less I'll have to keep Chuck entertained by myself."

Chuck was notorious for his high alcohol tolerance and frequently tried to rope in his fellow Elites whenever he procured a new vintage or wanted to celebrate. In Chuck's case, just getting through the day

with a smile on his face was a cause for celebration. All the celebrating was taking its toll on Surge's liver, however.

Lily grinned, but she didn't press the issue. She was pretty sure Surge liked having her around, even more so with Ash gone, but he would never admit it.

She got up, noting his usual twitch of annoyance as he noticed their shared height, but she was quick to fill the silence. "Okay, I'm heading out as soon as Dody gets her breakfast." She checked the window over the kitchen sink. The beginnings of dawn bled into the night horizon, and soon it would be morning. "I'll say hi to Blaine for you," she said with a wink.

"*Don't* bother," Surge said rudely.

Feeling refreshed and admittedly a bit better after her conversation with Surge, Lily scooped up Pikachu and headed outside to the coop where Dodrio and the other large birds slept. Normally, the castle's Pidgeot and Fearow would hunt for their own food, but the bird keepers also kept freshly killed Furret and Magikarp in case a bird needed to be dispatched without time for hunting. Lily entered the large coop and grabbed three Furret carcasses from the rafters where a Ranger had recently returned from a scouting mission with the slaughtered Pokemon. Pikachu sniffed the dead ferrets and wrinkled its nose.

"Dody," Lily called. "Are you awake?"

Dodrio was curled up on a soft mound of hay in one of the stalls separate from the Fearow and Pidgeot. When it heard her calling, the three heads lifted up from the wild mound of brown feathers that made up its large body and began to squawk. Lily entered the wooden stall with the dead Furret, and Dodrio rose up on its powerful legs. Immediately, the three heads began to squabble as they smelled the Furret.

"Okay, okay, one for each," Lily said. "Ready?"

She tossed one of the Furret corpses, and the left head snatched it up. The other two heads squawked and pecked at the victorious left head, but Lily threw another carcass and the right head caught it, its bickering silenced. She did the same for the middle head, and soon Dodrio fell silent as it gobbled down the Furret in one swallow each.

Lily giggled to herself. "You know you all share one body, right? So it all goes to the same place in the end?"

Dodrio's heads honked and the left one nudged her in the chest as if to say, 'Silly human!' By the time the bird was finished eating and Lily saddled her up for the run south, the sun had breached the horizon and banished the night fog that swept through the castle grounds like a pale sea. It was a clear day in the mountains with blue skies stretching far to the south. Lily would make good time to Pallet

Town. She may even have time to visit Ash's mother, Delia Ketchum, before she had to sail for Cinnabar.

Feeling a little refreshed at the prospect of the journey ahead, Lily led Dodrio out into the open air and mounted the tall bird. Pikachu perched on her head over her leather cap, its tail raised and its nose in the air as it took in the crisp morning scents. The Rangers were changing their shifts, and a few waved to her as they headed inside for a hot meal and a bath. Lily lowered her flight goggles and checked her leather gloves before taking hold of the reins. Pikachu hopped down into a specially-made groove in the saddle and settled in for the ride.

"Okay, Dody," Lily said. "Let's go!"

Dodrio took off with a powerful jump forward, and Lily had to hold onto the reins and keep her head low to keep from flying out of the saddle. The solemn grey walls of the Indigo Keep's courtyard were nothing but a blur as she whizzed by. The wind whistled in her covered ears and whipped her long ponytail like a lash behind her. Dodrio sprinted faster and faster over the grass, every powerful step smooth as though it truly were flying.

The gates were already open for the day, but the drawbridge over the moat had not yet been lowered. Lily grinned and ducked down lower over Pikachu, then gave Dodrio the reins. The dodo leaped magnificently into the air and sailed over the twenty-foot moat with ease, landing deftly on damp grass on the other side and shooting forward without so much as a hiccup. Some of the Rangers on watch in the ramparts over the drawbridge shouted to her and waved enthusiastically.

It would be a long few hours to Pallet Town, but at times like these, Lily didn't mind the wait. Dreams of flying on a Dragonite were grand, but there was nothing in all the world like the feeling of outrunning the wind.

Lily arrived in Pallet town about three hours later, having taken a short break along the way to rehydrate both Dodrio and herself. Route Twenty-Three was a rocky downhill track riddled with perilous crevasses, thick pine forests, and nesting Graveler that could pass for regular boulders to the oblivious passerby. Dodrio's three pairs of eyes missed nothing, though, and the trip had been rather smooth and uneventful.

Checking her watch, Lily saw that she had some time before the S.S. Anne was scheduled to disembark from the Pallet Town harbor. The ship had already arrived from its previous stop in Vermillion City, and the small town was practically bursting with seafaring travelers, both those intending a final stop and those who would go on to Cinnabar Island and farther west to Olivine City in Johto.

After a pair of mad Snorlax had wreaked havoc upon Pallet Town

more than two years ago courtesy of Team Rocket's heinous experiments, Pallet had taken many long months rebuilding and mourning its dead. The subsequent death of Professor Samuel Oak, a lifelong Pallet resident and renowned Pokemon researcher, had set the reconstruction back even more as the remaining residents deeply mourned his loss. Oak had been a beloved figure and leader in the community, as well as its protector. His family had been in Pallet Town for generations and put the little town on the map. Now, Oak's own grandson and the Viridian City Gym Leader, Gary Oak, filled the role of Pallet's protector in an official capacity. Pallet had no Gym Leader of its own, but under Viridian's jurisdiction, the recovering town found its feet again and moved forward with the reconstruction.

The Pallet Town that Lily entered now riding Dodrio was probably very different from what it had been before the Snorlax attack, before Oak's death. Before everything. She had been here a few times with Ash to visit his mother, Delia, whose house was rebuilt for her during her time in a coma in the Pewter Hospital, another consequence of the Snorlax attack. Lily could not imagine what it must have been like for her. She had woken up with little awareness of the passage of time only to find out her home had been razed to the ground, her trusted Pokemon and companion, Mr. Mime, had perished saving her life, and her only son had risen to the rank of Elite Four after fighting in a long and bloody war.

But Delia was a strong woman. She had pulled out of what everyone assumed was a hopeless medical tragedy thanks to an experimental procedure Ash had hated himself for agreeing to, fearful it would end up killing her. It didn't, and Delia woke up and moved back home, insisting she was merely a few months out of touch and physically weak, not an invalid or a basket case. Lily liked that about her. No one, not even Ash, could ever tell Delia Ketchum how to live her life.

Lily arrived at Delia's house, the home Ash had grown up in, and dismounted Dodrio. The streets in this part of town were relatively quiet, but the few people that were about and heading for town near the harbor shot her odd looks. Dodrio squawked at a passing couple, and they hurried off, wary of its three mercurial heads.

Delia answered the door after a moment when Lily knocked, but before she could properly greet the woman, something small and furry landed against Lily's chest and began crawling all over her. Pikachu sparked and squeaked angrily, but the little creature was deft and agile as it quickly frisked Lily for anything shiny or food.

"Lily!" Delia said. "What a lovely surprise!"

Lily barely heard her as the Pokemon crawling on top of her tried to yank her goggles free, wanting to wear them. A hand slipped into

her satchel and rummaged about for coins while she was busy trying to hold onto her goggles.

"Okay, calm down--- Ow! Did you just pinch me?" Lily said.

Delia laughed and pried the handsy Pokemon off of Lily. "Aipom, it's rude to steal," she scolded.

Aipom grinned and made a wheezing sound through its teeth as it wagged its long tail and the handful of coins it had nabbed from Lily. The purple monkey's dexterous tail rolled the coins between its fingers like a magician might do to entertain children. Pikachu was wholly unimpressed and sparked in warning. Aipom yelped and scampered around Delia's shoulders to hide behind her auburn head.

"It's okay, I know he gets excited around people," Lily said, dusting herself off. "But I'll be needing those coins back, okay?"

"Aipom?" Delia said.

Aipom frowned dramatically and grudgingly handed back the coins. Lily made a face as she accepted the coins, struck with an uncanny sense of deja vu. Aipom reminded her of a particularly wily Ghost she knew pretty well. "He's such a trickster, isn't he?"

"Oh yes, but you wouldn't believe what a big help he is for me around the house!" Delia gushed. "He can reach all the high places and tough corners when we dust. He likes cleaning so much that the house has never been more spotless!"

She laughed to herself, and Lily spared her a genuine smile. "I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"Come in, come in!" Delia ushered her inside, while Dodrio remained outside in the yard to nap after the hard run south.

"I didn't know you would be coming down," Delia said as she went to the kitchen and pulled on a pink apron over her cotton pants and sweater. "Are you heading to Cinnabar?"

"Yeah, the S.S. Anne's scheduled to leave later this morning, so I wanted to be here early to come and see you."

"You're a dear. How about some lunch?"

Ten minutes later, Delia brought out plates with sandwiches, freshly sliced Pecha berries, and iced lemonade. Lily did not realize how hungry she was until she saw the food and her stomach growled. The sound put Aipom on high alert and it scampered around the living room, bravely searching for the threat. Delia thought it was the funniest sight she'd ever seen.

"There's never a dull moment in the Ketchum house these days," she said, laughing.

Lily sat across from Delia on a loveseat with Pikachu on her lap. "Ash found you a good Pokemon. I'm glad." She paused for a moment. "You know, Aipom reminds me a little of Ash's Gengar, actually. He's also kind of a trickster. I mean, not that he steals coins. I don't even

know if he could pick up coins, being a Ghost and all, you know? Huh, I never thought about that..."

Delia smiled warmly at Lily's tendency to ramble on. "How is my Ash holding up these days? I'm sure you're all very busy."

Lily's expression fell a little, but she recovered quickly. "Oh, he didn't tell you?" She explained that Ash was away training on Mt. Silver far to the north, that he'd been gone for almost a month now.

"That sounds like my Ash," Delia said. "He always was eager for a new adventure. Did you know he used to spend hours by himself in the hills over Route One?"

"I didn't know that."

"Yes, he was always a bit of a dreamer. Why, when I heard about everything you all did while I was in the hospital, I believed it right away. There was always something about Ash, some kind of spirit of adventure in him. I suppose I never imagined it would take him this far, though."

Lily thought about that but said nothing.

"Something on your mind, dear?"

Delia was watching Lily intently, but not in a scrutinizing manner. She was the most disarming person Lily had ever met in her life. By all accounts, she was a happy, perhaps a bit eccentric housewife, pleasantly nosy and always attentive to those around her. But there was something sharp about her, a hidden intuition that made Lily feel like Delia Ketchum could have been an excellent police profiler if she'd lived a different life. There was no trace of it in Ash, who had always taken everything at face value and helped first, asked questions later.

"Am I that obvious?" Lily said.

Delia's expression softened and she set down her half-drunk lemonade, the ice cubes melting and diluting the sweet drink. "I imagine it must be hard to be apart from Ash for so long."

"Yeah, I do miss him." She felt stupid as soon as she said it. "I mean, I'm sure it's nothing compared to you! I get to see him pretty much all the time up in Indigo Plateau, but we're so busy and he doesn't always have time to come here and visit. Not that he doesn't want to! Of course he does, and I do, too, I mean, as long as I'm not intruding on your family time, you know..."

Lily hung her head. Why did she always end up running her mouth with every little inane thought that came to her mind? Steven Stone's sage advice from so long ago about her tendency to babble and ask too many questions had haunted her like a pesky back pain---it came back to bite her whenever she let her mind wander and forgot about keeping it in check.

Delia let her finish. "It's okay to miss him," she said gently.

"You're the second person today to tell me that."

"Then it must be true."

Delia got up and took their empty plates back to the kitchen. Aipom followed her and leaped up onto the counter, made a grab at a cabinet with its tail, and swung from the knob like a bat upside down. The cabinet opened under its weight, and Delia retrieved two small plates for pie that she brought back to the living room. Aipom dutifully closed the cabinet and trotted after her back to the living room.

"Why don't you tell me what's really on your mind," Delia said as they ate their pie.

It was Cheri berry pie, sweet and tart all at the same time, and Lily savored every bite.

"I would've come to see you anyway," Lily began, "but I guess, well, there's something I wanted to ask you while I was here. About Ash."

"Go on."

Lily set down her pie, and Pikachu hopped onto the table to nibble at the buttery crust while Aipom looked on in envy. It flexed the fingers on its tail hand, itching for a chance to snatch some pie for itself.

"I guess I was just wondering..." She swallowed, unsure how to phrase it. "How did... I mean, do you know, since you're his mom and you've known him all his life, um... How did Ash become a Medium?"

There was a short silence, but it was not a tense one. Delia sipped her lemonade and sat back in her chair. "That's an interesting question. Did he ask you to ask me about it?"

Lily frowned. "No... Wait, you mean he's never asked you himself?"

Delia shook her head. "Nope. And you know, I'm a pleb. I never really knew much about Tamers growing up out here in the boondocks. Sam was very good about keep this place safe." She averted her gaze, perhaps remembering something. "Sam was Clairvoyant, you know. That's how I found out about Ash. Sam told me."

"So, you didn't know until Professor Oak told you? You didn't see how Ash was turned?"

"Mm, yes, I remember Sam mentioning that Mediums like my Ash aren't born that way. They're made, not like the others. But to answer your question, no. I don't know how Ash became the way he did."

Lily's shoulders fell a bit without her realizing it, and it showed. "Oh, okay. That's too bad. I wonder how it happened? Ivy said Karen made her a Reaper. They spent a lot of time together when she was little. But the only other Medium in Kanto was Agatha, and Gary told me Professor Oak used some kind of Psychic power to keep her from coming here for a long time, so it couldn't have been her..."

Delia frowned, pensive. "Yes, it's quite mysterious, I suppose. But then, what's life without a little mystery and adventure?"

Lily couldn't help the smile that betrayed her. "You sound like Ash."

"He gets all his best qualities from me." She winked playfully, and Lily grinned in full.

"Well, I guess I should get going." Lily got up and stretched. Her limbs were a little sore from sitting in the saddle all morning and she felt sluggish after that delicious lunch, but she had a room in first class on the S.S. Anne waiting for her and a whole day to sleep it off before she reached Cinnabar.

Delia got up with her, and together they brought the remaining dishes to the kitchen. "It was lovely to see you, Lily," Delia said as Lily gathered her things. "Thank you for coming."

"Not at all. I wish I could stay longer."

"Perhaps on your way back? I'll give Gary a ring and we'll make a party of it. I'm sure he'd be happy to Teleport down from Viridian for a chance to see you!"

"Yeah, it's been a while," Lily said. "I feel like it's been forever, now that I think about it."

"Then it's settled. Send a bird when you're coming back, and I'll arrange it all."

"I will, thanks."

Dodrio yawned three times over but didn't get up when Lily approached it. Lily gave each head a pat and a kiss and thanked each one individually for bringing her this far, lest any one head become jealous of her affections. She recalled Dodrio and hoisted her pack. The harbor was a short walk south to the bay. Delia watched her from the doorway.

"You know," Delia said suddenly. "It doesn't have much to do with what you were asking about, but all this talk of mysterious things reminded me of something that happened to Ash when he was just a little boy. It's odd, I haven't thought about it much over the years, but I've never been able to put it out of my mind."

Curious, Lily said, "Oh, really? What happened?"

Delia's gaze was far away peering into the mists of memory, and she hugged herself as though cold. "Ash and Gary were just five, and Daisy was seven. Sam had a nanny who watched the kids while he was working in the lab, and she and I took the kids to the lake just off of Route One to play. It was a hot summer, and the kids wanted to swim, but the sea is dangerous for children.

"It was a lovely day by the lake. Mimey kept the wild Pokemon away all by himself, so the kids had a ball running around and swimming together. The nanny and I turned our heads for a second,

just a very short moment, and Daisy started screaming. Gary had fallen into the deeper waters, and he couldn't swim.

"I was so frightened," Delia said, shaking her head. "Of course, the nanny waded in after Gary, but Ash jumped in after him, too. Always wanting to be a hero, you know."

"Oh my gosh," Lily said. "That must've been so scary for you. But the nanny saved Gary?"

"Yes, she hauled them both out. She had Ash by the waist, and he had Gary by the arm. They came out of the lake like a conga line. Mimey levitated them out and revived Gary. The poor boy coughed up a lung, but he was all right. We cleaned up and wanted to get the kids home, of course. But when I called for Ash, it was just the strangest thing."

"What?"

Delia furrowed her brow, the unpleasant memory tugging at her like clammy fingers over her skin, searching for a way in. "He was standing there, by the lake, just staring into it. I called to him again, but it was like he didn't hear me. He was so taken by whatever he saw there, like he was in a trance. But when I went to fetch him, he was just staring at his own reflection in the water. It was the strangest thing."

Lily was not quite sure what to make of Delia's confession. Perhaps it was odd, but it didn't strike her as particularly memorable.

"It was like he saw something in the water that day, something I couldn't see. I know it sounds silly, but I've never seen him like that before, and I never did again. It was..." She struggled for the words. "It was like a part of him left me behind and dove to the bottom of that lake, somewhere I couldn't follow. I had to pick him up and carry him home, and he didn't make a sound the whole way back."

Creepy, Lily thought to herself.

"Gary's near drowning really shook us all up," Delia allowed. "Ash was in shock, I think. He was so young."

Even as she said the words, though, Lily had a hard time believing they were anything more than a paper-thin excuse to hide her unease.

"I'm sure it was very difficult for you," Lily said gently. "Drowning's really scary."

She shivered, remembering her own nightmares that plunged her into a watery grave almost every night lately.

"Oh, look at me rambling on. I don't want you to miss your boat," Delia said, smoothing her hair and smiling. "Sorry to end it on such a gloomy note. Remember what I said about your return trip, okay?"

Lily nodded. "Of course, I'll let you know when I'm coming back. It'll be a couple weeks."

They embraced warmly, and Delia patted Pikachu on the head.

"And you be good, ChuChu. Keep her company on the ship, okay?"

Pikachu squeaked happily at the free petting and nuzzled Delia's hand. Lily was off not long after and heading south to the harbor. Pikachu sat on her head, and she gripped the straps of her pack with both hands to take some of the weight off her shoulders.

The people she passed barely paid her any mind. To them, she was just another girl walking down the street. They had no idea one of the Elite Four was in their midst and blissfully enjoying the anonymity only a small town can afford. Such would not be the case when she got to Cinnabar. After everything that had happened with Lance on Shamouti Island, Lily and the others had become something of local celebrities, their battle with the former Champion elevating them to the front pages of every newspaper in Kanto and Johto. Lily had had a rough time of it dodging reporters and avoiding cameras as everyone begged her for a comment on what had happened, the real story.

Perhaps, after all was said and done, Lily had Gym Leader Clair of Blackthorn to thank for speaking to the media on her behalf. Granted, Clair only did it to save face for Blackthorn and the Dragon Tamers. Salvaging the Taki Dynasty's name after Lance's horrific treachery had seemed an impossible feat, but Clair had done it and subsequently taken the media's attention from Lily. Lily had not spoken to Clair at all since they'd met on Cinnabar Island and Clair had all but promised her she would lose her life and more if she dared to face Lance. If the papers could be believed, Clair had metamorphosed into a different person entirely, praising Lily as a Titan for true and reminding the public that Blackthorn Titans cleaned up their own messes.

Lily had been at the Viridian City Gym with Gary, Ivy, and Ash at the time that story broke. Ivy had grabbed Lily by the hips and tried unsuccessfully to pull down her pants. She kept shouting Clair's name, asking if she could hear her so far up Lily's ass. Someone had to pull Clair out of there before she got too far up and infected Lily with her bullshit. Even Gary had laughed at that one.

But Lily cared little for the games people like Clair played to keep their positions of power. The threat was eliminated, and that was all that mattered. Now, she was in a much better position to prevent something like that from happening again. That was enough.

The harbor was decently crowded as it was nearing time for the S.S. Anne to set sail. People had gathered to see off the large cruiser. A sailor and his Machop were checking tickets. Burly Machoke helped some of the crew load people's luggage onto a conveyor that would transport it on deck, where staff waited to take the bags to the rooms as a service. Lily flashed her ticket to the sailor on duty, and he gave her directions to the first class cabins toward the front of the ship.

"Thank you," she said, smiling. "My Pokemon will follow the ship.

Can I let them out here?"

The sailor grunted. "Swimmers? Sure, Miss. Just there." He indicated a spot in the water on the quayside. A couple other Water-type Pokemon bobbed in the water already---a pair of glugging Seaking, a sleek Golduck, and even a Brionne swam about and waited for their trainers to board and the ship to set sail so they could follow it.

Lily selected two Pokeballs from her belt and tossed them into the water. Two Dragonair, one a rich sapphire blue and the other a shocking shade of fuchsia, materialized in the water and spooked the Brionne, who dove underwater with a bark. Some kids nearby ran to gawk at the rare Dragons. Most people had never seen them before.

"Tiny, Shiny," Lily greeted the two Dragonair with a smile. "Feel like a swim to Cinnabar?"

Tiny the blue Dragonair hummed a soulful note and swam toward her at eye-level, its dark eyes soft and gentle as it let her run a hand over its scaly-sharp snout. Shiny the pink Dragonair echoed it and slithered about in the water playfully.

"Thought so," Lily said with a smile.

People gathered to admire the beautiful Dragons, but Lily didn't hang around to give them time to start talking to her. If they found out who she was, she could end up missing the boat. So she ran up the ramp to the deck, while the two Dragonair dove and enjoyed the water together. One of the sailors on deck was gaping at her when she looked up, having put two and two together. There was only one person in Kanto with two Dragonair, one of them pink. Lily raised a finger to her lips with a smirk, and he closed his mouth and swallowed, nodding dumbly.

Finding her room with ease, Lily dropped her pack and wandered out onto the private balcony that overlooked the starboard bow. She let Ampharos out, and the stout Light Pokemon towered over her as it gazed over the railing and took in the ocean breeze. It closed its eyes and breathed deeply, perhaps remembering its life back in Olivine City long ago before it had ended up in Ethan's care and eventually here with Lily. The two Dragonair waded in the waves below and called to Lily and Ampharos with their melancholy singing. She waved down to them and breathed in the ocean air. It had been a long time since she'd smelled the salt and humidity, chilly as it was. Pikachu shared her enthusiasm and happily scampered up Ampharos's shoulder, where it began to spark and share static with the larger Electric Pokemon. Pikachu squeaked excitedly with its nose to the wind.

Lily smiled. "Next stop, home."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cinnabar Island had changed very little since the Battle of Cinnabar so many months ago. The lava that had flowed through the streets after the volcano's eruption had been jackhammered and molded and now paved the streets in a glossy black sheen that reminded Lily of deep rivers under the pale moonlight hiding denizens of some other world in their inky depths. Her shoes clacked against the hardened magma as she made her way to Cinnabar Labs, where she now had her own office and ran her own team with the help of Indigo Plateau's generous funding. Pikachu resided on her head and remained alert for sounds out of the ordinary, and her Dragons and Omastar remained at sea to swim and hunt, a luxury not often afforded them in the mountainous Indigo Plateau.

Few people were out at this hour, tucked away in their homes to enjoy after dinner drinks or watch a movie with the kids or patrol the neighborhood alert to late-night prowlers. Lily wondered if she was one such shady prowler and giggled to herself. Pikachu squeaked curiously and batted her forehead.

"Oh, it's nothing, ChuChu. I just had a funny thought," Lily reassured the Electric rodent.

At five feet tall and sporting a sunny blonde ponytail outshined only by her stalwartly positive disposition, Lily was about as shady as the sun. She skipped the rest of the way to the lab, a wide and unremarkable warehouse of a building a couple blocks from the volcanic Mt. Cinnabar and the Gym it housed. The lobby lights were bright inside, but only a security guard and his Growlithe lingered in the lobby. Lily greeted him amiably, and he recognized her and waved her through.

Her key card gave her access to every wing in the lab, but she mostly preferred to limit her practice to the study of ancient Pokemon. She was especially interested in their revival and rejuvenation, a process that could take years to make any headway in for just a single species. Reviving her Omastar had been a years-long endeavor that had started with the tireless work of others long before Lily was even born.

But new information and breakthroughs were announced every day. Just last year, Lily's contemporary in Unova, Professor Aurea Juniper, had successfully revived an Archen chick after decades of dedicated research and trial and error, a huge triumph in the scientific community from Kanto to Kalos. That Archen was now a healthy (if

not terrifying) Archeops under the care of the Pewter City Gym Leader, Brock. Juniper was arguably the sharpest mind in paleogenetics today, and Lily wished more than anything that she would be able to meet the brilliant scientist one day just to bask in her presence.

Lily had had her own share of success even at such a young age, from Omastar to Gary Oak's Aerodactyl, an enormous avian reptile that never seemed to stop growing. She smiled at the thought of it, wondering how Gary was doing in his still relatively new position as Viridian City's Gym Leader after the previous Leader's exposure as the head of the villainous Team Rocket and subsequent downfall and death. It had been months since Lily had last seen Gary, or any of her closest friends, for that matter.

Ethan was off in Johto somewhere, ranging for the Elite Four and keeping their peace with the Johto Gym Leaders. Lyra and Marco were stationed in Mahogany Town running the new and improved Team Rocket after Giovanni, its former leader and Marco's late father, had used the organization to terrorize the mainland and nearly start an international war. Rosa had returned to Unova, and Ivy split her time ranging in Kanto and helping Gary run his Gym. And Ash, well...

Lily shook her head as she got to her private lab and let herself in. "Happy thoughts, Lily. Come on, cheer up."

Everyone had found a new purpose, a new way to help that played to their strengths, and Lily could not have been prouder of her friends. Missing them was a small price to pay for all the good they were doing out in the world. Pikachu looked up at her from its place in her arms, dark eyes wide and misty, like it could see right through her tough front. Lily managed a smile for it.

"I'm okay, just gotta focus on what I can do now. It'll be okay, ChuChu, I promise."

Her lab was dark, but it came to life in stark white when she flicked on the lights. Pictures adorned the corkboard over her cluttered desk---friends and memories from the last couple years. She set down her bag on the chair, not wanting to disturb the many documents and unopened mail that hid the desktop from view. Her eyes lingered on a photo booth series of pictures of Ash and her taped to the side of one of her large monitors. There were five thumbnails, each with the two of them making progressively sillier faces at the camera as they squeezed together in the booth meant for one person. The last one showed Lily smiling brightly under Ash's ratty red cap as he threw his arms around her and kissed her cheek. She ran her fingers over the silly pictures, remembering that day just a handful of weeks ago when they spent the whole day doing nothing but goofing off. That was just before he announced he would be leaving to solo

train in the Silver Mountains.

You better be okay, Ash, she thought to herself. *I'm coming after you if you don't come back soon.*

Pikachu squeaked, pulling her out of her thoughts, and Lily turned away from the memories that would be there whenever she wanted to look at them again. Pikachu had jumped up onto one of the long tables lined with high tech machinery and was batting at a series of blinking lights that had captured its attention. Lily cracked her knuckles and took a deep breath. Everything was just as she'd left it, and now she had what she hoped would be the last piece of the puzzle.

She reached for a chain around her neck tucked under her shirt and found the USB drive attached to it. This was too precious to keep in a bag or let it out of her sight for even a moment, and she could not stomach a sleepless night in her apartment waiting for tomorrow to get started. The little thumb drive was a plain silver gadget, unremarkable in every way but holding the data she needed to solve the last bit of a problem she'd been working on almost exclusively for months. At least, she hoped she could solve it now. There was only one way to find out.

She quickly donned a set of scrubs and thick gloves, a mask, and a cap to cover her hair, and then joined Pikachu at the table.

"Scooch over a little," she said to Pikachu as she popped the thumb drive into a large computer on the table.

The monitor lit up as it read the information on Lily's USB, and she began typing as she booted up a program to run through the data and combine it with the work she'd already done in the previous months. Letting the computer work on its own, she got up and went to the next table over, where various chemistry equipment was arranged. A mini fridge was plugged in under the table, and Lily opened it up and retrieved a box filled with microscope slides on ice.

"Shoo, ChuChu. I don't want you near this stuff, okay?"

Pikachu chittered and hopped to the computer table, its tail erect and ears twitching as it followed the blinking lights on the monitor. Lily worked quickly to set up a slide under a microscope that was hooked up to the computer network. She set up a centrifuge and pulled out a few fresh vials and mixing glasses while she waited. After a few minutes, the computer beeped and Pikachu sparked in surprise. Excited despite the late hour, Lily moved to check the monitor.

The program was reading the new data she'd introduced, and a 3D rendering of the projected results played out on the screen. She watched as digital cells grew and divided, small antibodies attacking larger diseased cells, holding her breath. The simulation played out to the end, and a pleasant ding sounded from the computer's speaker.

Lily made a high-pitched squeaking sound and scooped up Pikachu in her thick leather gloves, twirling them both around. Pikachu sparked, alarmed, but the sparks fizzled out on Lily's thunder-proof scrubs.

"Oh my god, ChuChu! I did it! I really did it!" She jumped around, hugging Pikachu close to her chest, and came face to face with the wall of pictures near her desk. Her friends looked down on her with smiling faces, laughter, and warm embraces, filling the empty lab with a brightness that hadn't been there before. "I did it, guys!"

She set Pikachu down on the desk, scattering documents as she searched for the X-Transceiver phone buried underneath them all. A tired voice picked up after two rings.

"Sir, it's me! That's, I mean, it's Lily. Of course you wouldn't know it was me since you can't see me, hah, and I guess I wouldn't be calling this late normally unless it was, like, *really* important---"

Some angry grumbling on the other end cut her off, but she paused only for a moment, too caught up in her excitement.

"Sir, just please---Blaine! I promise this is really *really* important." She raised her voice to be heard over his ire. "Blaine, I've done it. I found the cure."

The line went silent for a moment as her words reverberated in the darkness. Ash's silly faces looked back at her from their photo booth montage, and she bit her lip to keep from smiling too much.

"I can save you and Mewtwo."

Night blurred to day as Cinnabar Labs came to life and scientists poured in at Gym Leader Blaine's command to work on actualizing the cure Lily had found for Mewtwo's debilitating disease. Blaine would not have bothered if not for the problem that the same disease infected him, too, and they were both dying---the mad creator and his monster.

The days passed, and Lily's team worked overtime to synthesize the antidote. When they were finally successful, Blaine tested it on himself. Lily hovered over him with a smock and mask on to shield herself, while Blaine removed his shirt and exposed his rotting arm and chest. The skin was wet with weeping sores, grey-green with disease and foul-smelling, like damp wood and graveyard soil. When Lily had first seen it, the sickness had spread past his elbow. Now, the shadow of death reached past his shoulder and covered half of his chest and back. If it reached his heart and lungs, Lily was sure he would not survive for much longer. As it was, they were cutting it very close.

"What are you waiting for?" Blaine said in that eerily quiet voice that nonetheless seemed to command attention. His flinty eyes bored into her, and the back of her neck began to sweat. "Do it."

Lily held an enormous hypodermic needle filled with clear liquid---

the synthesized antidote. She'd sterilized his arm at the elbow joint and tried not to throw up at the exposure to his diseased arm. "Right, okay, this will probably hurt, so, um, I'm sorry."

She carefully dug the needle into his flesh, punctured the vein, and injected the fluid slowly. Blaine shuddered and sat back in the chair. His arm jerked, but Lily held him down as best she could. His good hand was fisted so hard that the knuckles had turned white, and he was perspiring on his bald head as he breathed through his nose and kept his smoldering eyes focused on a point on the wall ahead. Lily bit her lip at his clear signs of agony. She knew his arm pained him constantly, but he had a high tolerance and hid his suffering well. It was only recently, as his disease became progressively and exponentially worse, that Marla, the highest-ranking general in the Cinnabar military, captain of the Charizard Assault Team, and Blaine's own granddaughter had even found out about his condition.

As though she'd somehow known Lily was thinking of her, Marla herself burst through the door past the guard on duty, who was sputtering formalities and begging her not to barge in, but Marla did not hear him. The buxom thirty-something redhead had always had a mind of her own to do whatever the hell she wanted, and she needed no one's permission. When she saw Lily hunched over Blaine and another lab tech overseeing the computer outputs that monitored Blaine's vitals, she went white as a sheet.

"Let me see," she said, walking to Blaine's other side opposite Lily.

"Marla," Blaine said. "You shouldn't be here for this."

"Like hell," Marla snapped.

Lily winced. Marla was the only person on the planet who was comfortable bossing Blaine around. Probably because she was pretty sure Blaine would have anyone else excommunicated or worse. But Marla was his only living family and his named successor as Gym Leader, as well as a powerful Ignifera in her own right.

"I still can't believe I didn't know about this sooner," Marla went on as she watched Lily dispose of the empty hypodermic needle and wrap up Blaine's exposed arm in fresh bandages.

"It was not your concern," Blaine said cooly.

"You're *dying*," Marla said, her anger palpable. "How is that not my concern? What were you going to do, wait until your deathbed to tell me about this? What if Lily hadn't found a cure? What then?"

"It's a moot point now," Blaine said, his patience waning fast. He held his bandaged arm to his chest and sat up. "Everything is fine now."

"Oh, really?" Marla looked around the lab. "Then why am I seeing more of the antidote brewing over there? Do you need more than one dose? Is it really an antidote, or is it just treating the symptoms?"

"Oh, don't worry, that's not for Blaine," Lily said with a smile.

Her smile faltered as soon as Blaine turned his flinty glower upon her, and she realized her mistake.

"Not for him?" Marla repeated. "Then who's it for? Is someone else sick with whatever this is?"

Lily looked at her feet and bit her lip. Not many people knew about Mewtwo, and Blaine had sworn her to secrecy from all but her dedicated lab tech, Josef, whom she required to help her with her work. Josef was unhelpfully silent now as he found the monitors showing Blaine's vitals supremely interesting all of a sudden. Everyone else working to synthesize the antidote had no idea what they were really doing, just following orders.

"Grandfather?" Marla pressed.

"It's not your concern," Blaine said, standing and shrugging on his button-up shirt. He wobbled on his feet, and Lily reached for him.

"Careful, those're the effects of the antidote you're feeling," she said, concerned. "You should lie down and rest, okay? We'll have to monitor you overnight, anyway, so..."

Blaine looked like he'd rather swallow hot coals, but he steadied himself on the back of the chair. "Fine. But I'll be returning to my quarters at the Gym. You may monitor me from there if you must."

Marla opened her mouth to argue further, but Blaine shot her a reproving look.

"Not another word, Marla. It is time to put this behind us."

Marla's red ringlets framed her round face and shook with her anger, and Lily had a sudden fantasy that they might burst into flame and come alive, like so many fiery snakes. They didn't, of course, and she helped Blaine to a wheelchair.

"Josef, I'll take Blaine back to the Gym," Lily said to her lab tech assistant. "Please finish up here."

"No problem," Josef the lab tech said quickly.

Lily pushed Blaine's wheelchair down the hall, outside, and up the lava-hardened street towards the volcano Gym. Marla watched them go and did not follow, but Lily did not like the look in her eyes that were so much like Blaine's. Marla did not appreciate being kept in the dark.

When they arrived at the Gym and the guards allowed them passage, it was a short trip to Blaine's quarters. After the volcanic eruption during the Battle of Cinnabar, most of the Gym had been destroyed since it was built directly into the volcano. Now, it was almost entirely reconstructed, and the volcano had fallen dormant once more. Even the last eruption had been relatively tame as far as volcanos were concerned. That was thanks to Mewtwo's intervention. Its unmatched Psychic powers had single-handedly minimized the

damage to the island city and quelled the volatile volcano soon after it had erupted. Mewtwo had intervened then to save itself, Lily knew. It was imprisoned deep in the bowels of the Cinnabar Gym in the heart of the volcano, and there it remained, suffering from the same sickness Blaine suffered from. Until now. He would be cured. She would have to monitor him overnight, but Lily was confident in the hundreds of trials she'd conducted, checking and double checking and triple checking everything, and then checking it all over again. This would work for him. And if it worked for him, it should work for Mewtwo, too.

Blaine's room was nothing special or especially grand. It was large, but it was spartanly furnished and sparing in decor. Only a couple framed pictures on a dresser betrayed that someone actually lived here. The space had a cold and austere feel to it despite residing inside a volcano. Lily helped him to the bed and snapped a metal bracelet over his good wrist. It contained the latest in Galactic Enterprise's Poketch technology straight out of Veilstone City in Sinnoh, and it would send updated information about Blaine's vitals every thirty seconds back to the lab.

"I'll get one of the staff to send you something to eat," Lily said, backing up to give him some space. Pikachu squeaked on her shoulder as it looked down at Blaine. From up here, Lily wondered at how old and tired he looked. He was an old man, past eighty, but he hid his age and his handicap very well, having always been a little bit scary to even someone like her, an Elite tasked with the protection of the continent. Often, when Lily was around Blaine, she questioned her place at Indigo Plateau. But seeing him now, just a sick old man who needed a caring hand and a good night's rest after so many years of fighting, she was not so sure.

"Fine," he said.

Lily spared him a small smile. "You're gonna be okay, good as new in no time. I promise. I'll let you rest now."

She turned to leave, but his soft voice stopped her. "Good work, Miss Kida."

Lily bit back a wide grin at the closest thing to heartfelt gratitude she would probably ever get from Blaine. "You're welcome, sir," she said, excusing herself.

Lily was exhausted. She took shifts with Josef monitoring Blaine's condition over the next twenty-four hours, anxious and mentally preparing herself for the worst, some unseen side-effect or reaction, but none came. He slept for nearly eighteen hours under the effects of the antidote, and a personal nurse changed his bandages regularly and cleaned the oozing welts on his arm and shoulder every couple of hours. Late the following morning, the nurse rang the lab and reported

that the swelling in his arm had gone down, and that she had begun to notice the weeping welts drying up and shrinking. Lily was beyond ecstatic at the signs of recovery, and it gave her the energy to finish up the next batch of antidote she was preparing for Mewtwo. It would not be long. She could not wait to tell Gary when she saw him in a couple days' time back in Pallet Town. He would be relieved to know Mewtwo would no longer be suffering, too.

Unable to contain her excitement, Lily wrote a letter and sent a carrier Pidgeotto to deliver it north to Delia Ketchum in Pallet Town. Lily wrote that she planned to return in a few days' time, and that she had some very good news for Gary if he could spare the time to visit Pallet Town.

By the next afternoon, Blaine was walking around on his own again and the color had returned to his face. His arm was in a sling, but his hand was not bandaged, and Lily was pleased to see that the grey-green pallor had begun to recede, revealing a more natural beige color in his spindly fingers. A tray with tea was sitting on the coffee table, already consumed and awaiting removal. Blaine was speaking with a Gym trainer when Lily was admitted to his room.

"We can finish discussing the details later," Blaine said by way of dismissal.

The Gym trainer, a young man in an infantry uniform, saluted and excused himself. His Flareon trotted along after him, purring as it bounded after its trainer. Lily smiled down at the fluffy feline as it brushed past her out the door, its fur sending pleasant warm tingles up her leg.

She'd left Pikachu back at the lab with her Omastar, where the hatchery had welcomed a new baby Omanyte resurrected from fossilized DNA. It would be good for the baby Pokemon to interact with other Pokemon and not just humans.

"Miss Kida," Blaine said by way of greeting. He was always so impersonal and stiff with her despite the many months of a close-working relationship they had cultivated and all they had been through together.

"Hi Blaine, I came to check up on you. I mean, not check up like I'm monitoring you or something. Er, well, I mean I *am* monitoring your progress, just not like how it sounded..." she stammered.

Why did she always stumble around Blaine? Shouldn't she be used to him by now? Blaine took her odd manner in stride, as he always did.

"I'm feeling much better, as you can see," he said. "Though I doubt you came all this way just to confirm that."

She flushed. He always could suss out an ulterior motive. Maybe that's what made him a good Gym Leader. She wished she could be

more like that, more cunning and perceptive than she was. "Yeah, actually, now that you mention it, I wanted to let you know that the next batch of antidote is finished and ready to use."

"Use for what?"

Lily frowned. "What? Oh, you know, for Mewtwo. Since it's working so well on you, I figured I might as well go ahead with its treatment, too."

"Absolutely not," Blaine said, walking to stand near the door.

The dismissive gesture was not lost on Lily. She felt as though he'd smacked her on the face, and she gaped at him. "I-I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me. Mewtwo will not be receiving any treatment."

Lily was not sure she was hearing him right. "But... Wait, what? I've been working on this cure for months so Mewtwo could get better---"

"You mean, so that I could get better," Blaine interrupted.

"Well, yeah, you *and* Mewtwo. That was the entire point of this..." She trailed off as she met his hard gaze and realized the truth that had been there all along. "...You never planned on giving Mewtwo the cure, did you?"

Blaine said nothing, but he didn't need to. Lily flushed with anger and embarrassment. How could she have been so stupid as to not sense this coming earlier?

"How could you?" she said, shaking. "You tricked me! You knew I signed up for this thinking you'd free Mewtwo once it was healed. You said with Team Rocket gone, there was no need for your deterrent anymore. The only reason you kept Mewtwo locked up was because of its disease, so it wouldn't infect anybody else..."

"Miss Kida, try to set aside your emotions for a moment," Blaine said in that razor blade whisper he was famous for. "Even if I were to let you cure Mewtwo, I have no intention of setting it free. Perhaps the threat of Team Rocket is no longer a viable reason to house a weapon of mass destruction, but releasing Mewtwo to the wild would unleash a new threat upon the world the likes of which we are not prepared to counter. A Psychic of Mewtwo's ability and genius is without equal, and its hatred grows every day. It was created as a clone of the mythical Pokemon Mew. No ordinary Pokemon could ever stand on equal footing to it. To release that kind of power in the world would be akin to suicide."

Lily could not believe what she was hearing. "I can't believe you!" she was shouting now. "You're the one who created Mewtwo and locked it up like a prisoner for *years*. If Mewtwo hates anybody, it's *you*. You're the reason Mewtwo became what it is, why it's so dangerous. Hatred isn't something we're born with, we learn it through awful experiences!"

Blaine looked down at her over his nose, unmoved by her impassioned tirade. "Mewtwo is an intelligent and enlightened creature, but it is also made of flesh and blood. A beast, just like any other Pokemon. You're a scientist, so you should understand. Mewtwo's resentment doesn't end with me; it associates humans with the source of its suffering. Ergo, all humans are its enemy. And you wish me to heal the only effective shackle I have on it and *release* it? I would have hoped even you could not be so naive."

There were tears in her eyes as his coldly patronizing logic pierced her like knives. Tears of embarrassment that she had not seen this coming from Blaine of all people, of frustration over her lack of control of the situation. She was a Titan, goddamnit. Control was in her blood, in her nature. Even as a scientist, she had always done everything in her power to assume total control over her experiments and her research. Now that she had none, she could not help the sickening pang of helplessness and shame, like this was her fault, her defeat.

The door opened all of a sudden, and Marla was standing there with wide eyes as she stared at Blaine in disbelief. Her neck was flushed red with anger under the collar of her flight uniform---she'd just come from working out the CATs in sky drills---and Lily guessed from her expression that she'd heard most of the conversation through the door.

"Grandfather," she said in a voice that did not sound like herself. "Are you... Are you keeping someone prisoner here? Someone who's sick?"

Blaine, surprised to see her standing there, recovered quickly and reached for her. "Marla, it's not what you think."

Marla sidestepped him and avoided his searching hand. "I don't know what to think. I came here to ask if you wanted to have lunch together and see how you were recovering, and then I heard Lily shouting about how you've locked up someone named Mewtwo for years. What the hell is going on?"

Lily was as stunned as Blaine had been when Marla burst in unannounced. Now, however, she sensed an unlikely ally in Marla. Before she could stop to think it through, Lily blurted out, "Mewtwo's a Psychic Pokemon Blaine has enslaved here in the volcano."

Marla looked horrified. "It... You *what*?"

Blaine glared at Lily, and she could have sworn the temperature in the room rose a few degrees. But she tried not to look at him and continued.

"Blaine created Mewtwo a long time ago to act as a weapon to keep Cinnabar safe from the Johtoans and Team Rocket and anybody else who he thought was a threat," Lily said quickly. "Mewtwo's also

sick with what Blaine had. It's the reason he got sick, too. Gary Oak and I discovered Mewtwo back during the Battle of Cinnabar."

Marla put up a hand as though to steady herself. "So you're telling me we have a...a superpowered Pokemon trapped here right under our noses? And it's dying?"

"It's not just a Pokemon," Blaine tried to salvage the situation. "It's dangerous. I keep Mewtwo locked up for everyone's safety. It's power has saved us in the past. It was Mewtwo's power that stopped that eruption during the Battle of Cinnabar."

Marla shook her head as she tried to process all this. "I saw that eruption, how the lava flowed in reverse back into the volcano. You're telling me one Psychic had the power to stop the course of nature? Grandfather, what the hell did you *do*?"

"Maybe it's better if you see Mewtwo for yourself," Lily said. "It's housed here in the volcano on the lower levels."

Blaine rubbed his mouth as he tried to hide is obvious anger at the way his control of the situation had all but evaporated in a matter of minutes. Marla looked at him expectantly.

"Yes, that's a *great* idea. Show me now," she said.

"No," Blaine said. "I am the Gym Leader here, and I'm Mewtwo's creator. I will not be defied."

"You were hiding a deadly illness from me for years. I'm your family!" Marla said, exasperated. "And I'm your heir. This Gym will be mine after you're gone, which until yesterday was pretty damn soon until her." She gestured to Lily. "I have a right to know something like this, especially if this Mewtwo's power really is great enough to destroy the island."

Lily sensed that Blaine and Marla were at an impasse, and the tense silence lingered for a few moments.

"Fine," Blaine said at length. "You want to see Mewtwo? Then follow me."

He brushed past Marla and headed out the door. Marla dashed after him, leaving Lily to follow. He had relented, and she could hardly believe it. Why had he relented so easily? Lily jogged after them on her short legs to keep up, not wanting to be left behind. Eventually she found herself in a control room with machinery that monitored the volcano's seismic activity, a room she knew very well. A column of fire blazed near the far wall, and an old crone sat cross-legged on the floor in flowing white silks. She had a blindfold on, and her long hair pooled on the floor behind her buttocks like spun silver thread. She rocked back and forth, mumbling to herself.

"The Pyromancer?" Marla said. "What are we doing here?"

"You wanted to see Mewtwo," Blaine said by way of explanation. He tapped a few keys on the supercomputer, and the column of flames

parted to reveal a hidden floor panel.

Lily eyed the old woman---the Pyromancer---where she rocked on the floor muttering nonsense. She remembered the last time she'd been in here and met the Pyromancer, the human mouthpiece through which Mewtwo would sometimes communicate with others. To anyone who did not know of Mewtwo's existence, the Pyromancer appeared to be a loony old crone, creepy and weird. But Lily new better.

Blaine stepped onto the panel and waited as it lowered him to the secret level below. Marla shot a look back at Lily.

"You knew about this since the Battle of Cinnabar?" she demanded.

Lily nodded numbly. "Gary figured it out."

"The Clairvoyant. Ugh, figures." Marla made a face and glared at the panel that had risen again, waiting for its next passenger. "I cannot believe this."

She stood on the panel and waited for it to lower her to the level below, her comely face twisted in anger and disbelief. Lily waited for the panel to return so that she could ride it down next. The Pyromancer continued to rock as though privy to some unheard music. Just as the panel returned and Lily stepped onto it, the Pyromancer stopped rocking and seemed to stare straight at Lily through her tattered blindfold.

"Daughter of Dragons," she said in her tinny rasping voice.

"I don't want a creepy prophecy today, thank you," Lily said.

"A prophecy... A question... A warning?"

Lily frowned. "What're you talking about?"

The Pyromancer smiled and revealed a mouth full of yellowed and broken teeth. "How does the haunted one sleep when waking is a dream, and the dream is not his?"

The panel began to descend with Lily on it, and all she could do was stare in question at the old woman. The fire soon hid her grinning blotchy face, and Lily had no choice but to let it go. The old woman was crazy, but she spoke with Mewtwo's voice sometimes when the Psychic was trying to communicate with humans. Was it Mewtwo who had spoken to her just now? Or the ramblings of an old loon?

"Daughter of Dragons, the one you seek is nigh..."

Lily shivered at the memory of the Pyromancer's last warning to her the last time she'd been in this room. That was just days before she eventually faced Lance the Dragonmaster. But Lance was gone, dead, drowned under leagues of sea and storm, just as Ash and the papers and everyone said.

"Oh my god," Marla said.

Lily put the thoughts out of her mind and joined Blaine and Marla as they faced Mewtwo's large tank, the only thing in this hollow

cavern. The lights were dim and the air was thick and stifling, but Lily could see the creature well enough. It was as tall as a man, anthropomorphic, and grey. Its head was large as though inflated like a balloon, and its limbs had only three gnarled digits each. A long tail wrapped around its legs and tapered to the bottom of the tank. Mewtwo floated in the medicinal waters of its coffin cage, eyes closed and an entire arm and part of its chest rotted away to nothing with the effects of the disease it shared with Blaine. For all intents and purposes, it appeared to be asleep, or possibly dead.

Marla touched a hand to the glass, amazed at what she was seeing, and all of a sudden, Mewtwo opened its eyes. They were two black pits that seemed to suck in all the meager light in the cavern, and Marla jumped and yanked her hand back in surprise. Mewtwo blinked slowly as it surveyed its visitors. Lily shivered as she felt its eyes on her, and she wondered if it remembered her.

"What on earth..." Marla trailed off.

"This is Mewtwo," Blaine said. "As you can see, it's very sick, like I was. It's disease makes it weak and lets me contain it here safely."

"Grandfather," Marla said numbly, "this is wrong. Creation or no, this is a Pokemon, and it's obviously alive. You can't just keep it here like a trophy. There's not even any natural light that gets in here. Has it ever even been outside?"

Blaine looked like he was counting to ten in his head to control his temper. "Of course not. If I were to let Mewtwo out, it would destroy us all."

"Only because you put it here," Lily interjected.

"That's quite enough, Miss Kida," Blaine said harshly. "I've heard your concerns, and I choose to ignore them. You may be one of the Elite Four now, but even as a suzerain you have little actual power over the several Kantoan States." He paused and, more gently, added, "I cannot change the past. All I can do is protect my island and the people and Pokemon living on it."

"Mewtwo's a Pokemon living on this island, too," Lily said. "You're not protecting it by letting it suffer the way you've suffered."

"She's right," Marla said, eyes transfixed on Mewtwo like she still could not quite believe it. "This is wrong. No living creature deserves such a wretched existence as this."

"Damnit, listen to me!"

Lily had never heard Blaine raise his voice in anger, not even during the Battle of Cinnabar. Marla looked as shocked as Lily felt, and they both fell silent, unsure what to make of this.

"I agree that Mewtwo's predicament is pitiable," Blaine went on, "but that does not change the fact that it is not only dangerous, but hostile. Violent. It has made a few attempts to escape, one of which

Miss Kida will remember well, seeing as she was present for it."

Lily lowered her gaze when Marla turned to her expectantly. She did remember. Mewtwo had used the Pyromancer to try to kill Gary and her when they'd foolishly snuck in here with plans to set Mewtwo free. If Blaine had not shown up and stopped the Pyromancer, Lily might not be here today.

"Mewtwo does not understand compassion. Even those who have tried to help it have seen its violent tendencies first-hand. The bottom line is that release is absolutely out of the question. And if Mewtwo receives the cure, its body will regenerate and it will regain its full Psychic powers. Even I do not know the extent of them, but you'll remember from the last eruption that even in its current state, Mewtwo was capable of reversing a natural disaster. Must I spell out for you how unconscionably stupid it would be to unleash its evil upon the world?"

Marla was silent for a moment, and Lily could feel fresh tears threatening to spill. Why couldn't Blaine be convinced? Why couldn't he see it the way she did? If Mewtwo was evil, then it was entirely because of Blaine's treatment of it. If shown kindness, then surely Mewtwo could be redeemed and rehabilitated. Healing it would be a good first step in that direction.

"No," Marla said at last. "I understand. What you've done is unforgivable, and once this poor creature has succumbed to its illness, I'll keep your secret to spare you the shame. But you're right, healing Mewtwo and giving it access to its full powers could endanger the entire island."

"What? No!" Lily pleaded. "You can't mean that, General Marla!"

"I do," Marla said. "I don't like this any more than you do, and when I'm Gym Leader, nothing like this will *ever* happen again." She nearly spat the declaration so Blaine would know she was serious. "But I can't see any other way to go about this."

"A good Gym Leader must always shun personal emotions and solve problems with logic and reason and the good of her people in mind," Blaine said. "I'm relieved to know I have a worthy successor in you, Marla."

Marla did not acknowledge his praise as she stared at Mewtwo sullenly like she hadn't just condemned it to live the rest of its days in constant suffering.

"So that's it," Lily said.

"Your cure was a success, Miss Kida," Blaine said. "I expect you'll want to return to your official duties in Indigo Plateau shortly."

Overruled and dismissed, just like that. What good was being one of the Elite Four if she couldn't even save one suffering Pokemon? Lily felt the overwhelming urge to cry and scream, but doing so would

only hurt her cause even more. She clenched her fists so hard she was sure her nails would puncture the skin. Breathing through her teeth, she found Blaine's gaze and held it.

"Mewtwo's not the monster here," she spat. "You are."

She marched back to the platform, unable to stomach breathing the same air as him for another minute. Blaine grabbed her wrist, a scorching hot grip, but she yanked free roughly, not caring if she hurt him by mistake.

"Miss Kida," Blaine tried, pleading like she'd never heard him sound before.

"You disgust me," she said as she stepped onto the rising platform with her back turned and waited for it to transport her to the floor above.

Mewtwo watched her ascend with dark eyes, silent in its tank.

Lily was packed and ready to make the nautical journey back to Pallet Town. Pikachu chittered happily and burrowed in her bag among the folded clothes.

"ChuChu, what're you doing? You don't want to ride with the laundry, do you?" Lily said playfully.

Pikachu squeaked and pawed at some socks Lily was folding. It was nice to have Pikachu around to cheer her up after the miserable experience she'd had the other day confronting Blaine about Mewtwo. She hadn't seen Blaine since and had Josef continue to monitor his recovery in her stead while she focused on the Omanyte hatchling. She'd decided to call it 'Omny' for short. It was a cute little thing, very playful and outgoing where her own Omastar had tended towards diffidence.

"I think I'll ask Gym Leader Misty to look after Omny. What do you think, ChuChu?" Lily said.

Pikachu squeaked happily, its red cheeks sparking with pent up static electricity. She smiled and scooped it out of her pack to sit upon her shoulder.

"Yeah, I can't think of a better person for the job."

Misty had once dated Ash a long time ago before Lily had met either of them, and there was a time when Lily felt insecure and even a little threatened by that. Misty was gorgeous and fun and smart, and she was a powerful Syreni, the Gym Leader of Cerulean City, and Violet's younger sister. She was the full package, and Lily herself couldn't help but like Misty once she'd gotten to know her a little, too. Misty would sometimes visit Violet in Indigo Plateau for a couple days. Misty and Ash seemed to get along fine despite their history. It had been a relatively amicable split after all was said and done, and Lily sometimes feared that Ash still harbored feelings for the redheaded Gym Leader. But those times had passed, and her fears

along with them. Misty herself had assured Lily that there was nothing between Ash and her anymore. It just didn't work out. Some pieces just did not fit together, no matter how hard you tried to make them.

Lily smiled sadly at the thought. Misty was a lovely person who had helped not just Ash, but also Gary and Ivy immensely in the past. She hoped that one day, Misty would find the happiness she deserved, too.

"Until then, she'll have a super cute baby Omanyte to take care of! Isn't that great, ChuChu?" Lily laughed.

She had already sent a letter to the Cerulean City Gym with the morning post, and Josef had instructions to ship Omanyte in a Pokeball once it was four weeks old. By then, it should be able to make the journey safely.

Mood brightened somewhat, Lily finished packing and headed for the harbor. All her Pokemon were accounted for, and Pikachu rode on her head like a scout, or some pompous yellow hat. Lily smiled at the thought of Pikachu as a hat and reached up to scratch its ear. The docks were not far from her apartment, and her ship was scheduled to leave within the hour.

But when she arrived at the docks, the sight of Marla in all her military regalia completely deflated her rising spirits and she stopped dead in her tracks, unsure what to do. Marla spotted her and jogged to meet her.

"I was waiting for you to come by here," Marla explained.

"Well, you found me," Lily said in a clipped tone.

Marla took a moment to study the shorter girl. "You're right, you know. It is cruel and unfair what Blaine's doing."

Lily could have screamed. "Then why did you go along with him? Why didn't you side with me? Maybe we could've convinced him together."

"No, we couldn't have. And it would've been folly to try. Lily, look me in the eye and tell me true. Do you really think Mewtwo would recover and stay docile in that tank happily? Or if it escaped, and I can't think of any reason it wouldn't try to, do you honestly think it wouldn't seek revenge for how it's been treated?"

Lily opened her mouth to argue, mindful of the people bustling about around them. The docks were always busy in the mornings with fishermen coming back from the early morning haul, restaurants opening for breakfast, and locals filling the spaces in between enjoying the sun and salty air. But she found she could not refute Marla's words with any confidence.

"Of course I think it's dangerous," Lily said, "but Mewtwo's only ever known cruelty and neglect. If we could show it kindness, then maybe it could learn to let go of the past and live peacefully."

Marla looked at her like she pitied her. Lily *hated* to be pitied. It reminded her of Clair and the way she'd looked at Lily here on these very docks so long ago before Lily had set off in search of Lance. *Silly girl, the world isn't as pretty as the fantasies in that silly little head of yours.*

"Don't look at me like that," she growled.

Marla eyed her sharp teeth and pressed her lips together. "I'm sorry, but I think you're wrong. Some things can never be forgotten."

"But they can be forgiven," Lily argued. "With enough time, you can learn to live with something ugly, and maybe you'll even think it's not so ugly as you once thought."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Of course I do."

"Could you do it?" Marla challenged. "Forgive someone who wronged you in the worst way possible?"

There was no pity in Marla's flinty eyes anymore as she searched Lily's face, curious for an answer.

"Yes," Lily said readily. "I know I could."

Marla nodded at length, but she did not look convinced. "You've got to be the strangest Titan I've ever met."

Lily forced herself to smile. "I take that as a compliment."

The departure horn on the S.S. Marigold sounded, the last call for all passengers to board.

"Don't worry about Blaine," Marla said. "He's never been an easy man to get along with, but he does care about you and your opinion."

"I'm one of the Elite Four now. He has to care."

"No, I mean, he cares about *you*, as a person. Even if he doesn't always show it. Believe me, I know."

Lily shrugged. If it was true, Blaine had a funny way of showing it. "I'll take your word for it."

Marla watched Lily climb the gangplank with her pack in hand and Pikachu perched on her head. It felt like a trek up a mountain for how heavy Lily's feet felt with each step. She hated leaving like this, ending on such a low note with Blaine. He was still technically her boss at the Cinnabar Labs, and their working relationship had become much closer since she joined the Elite Four. He was a good man, she wanted to think. No, she knew he was a good man deep down. She needed only to think back to the Battle of Cinnabar to remember that much, to remember how brave and selfless a leader he was. But this business with Mewtwo had been a thorn in her side ever since she'd first discovered the secret. Blaine had shown her a different side of himself then, the cold scientist interested in progress and willing to pile up the bodies in order to climb ever higher. In a way, he was not so different from Ariana and the other Team Rocket Admins Lily had faced during

the Battle of Cinnabar, the scientists behind the despicable Chimera project built upon the pain and suffering of countless Pokemon in the name of progress. But Blaine had achieved something incredible in the end. To create a Pokemon like Mewtwo was an unparalleled act of scientific achievement. But at what cost? It didn't feel right, even if the risks associated with helping Mewtwo in any way were very high.

Lily leaned over the railing and stared back at Cinnabar as the S.S. Marigold began to pull out of the harbor. Marla still stood on the dock watching the ship sail away, and all the people bustling about their daily lives continued on like nothing was amiss. They knew nothing of the caged power in their midst that had once saved them all from sure destruction, wasting away in squalor and agony even now so that they could live their lives under the sun in blissful ignorance. The finished antidote samples sat in a fridge in the Cinnabar Labs in Lily's office, forgotten and collecting dust. And there was nothing she could do.

"I hate this," she whispered to the sea breeze that tickled her cheeks and fluttered her long ponytail.

The S.S. Marigold was just clear of the shallows and would soon pick up speed as it headed into deeper water and charted a course north. Lily figured she should go find her room and settle in, but she was not feeling the energy to move, much less enjoy the first class cabin she knew was waiting for her. The sky was blue and cloudless, a beautiful day. Wingull and Pelipper honked as they circled the docks where the fishermen were filleting the day's catch. The smells of fried fish and lemon and cooking fire wafted on the breeze and mingled with the briny smell of the ocean. A school of Luvdisc leaped from the water in flowery droves as they chased the wake of the S.S. Marigold. Lily sighed as she leaned on her elbow and watched Cinnabar slowly shrink.

Movement high above caught her eye, and she squinted against the sun to see better. Something had shot out of the mouth of Mt. Cinnabar, the volcano that housed the Gym and gave the island its name. It was small at this distance and hard to make out, but it looked as though whatever it was was hovering in midair, as though suspended.

"What is that?" Lily said aloud.

Others on deck had noticed it, too, and gathered at the railing to see better. The thing spread what looked like arms. No, that wasn't quite right. That was one arm, she was sure of it, and the other one was a tail, a very long tail. Its other arm was hidden or missing. Lily's stomach clenched and a torrential wave of nausea passed through her suddenly as she understood what she was seeing.

"Oh, shit," she said shakily. "That's---"

But she didn't finish her sentence. A loud crack resounded from the

volcano, as though the earth itself had split in two, and everyone on deck quailed and covered their ears. Moments later, something bright and orange burst from the mouth of the volcano like fireworks. Mt. Cinnabar was erupting, suddenly and violently, and Mewtwo floated high above it, coaxing the lava to spew and churn like a demigod summoning its wrath from the bowels of the earth below.

How had it escaped? It was supposed to be too sick to move, much less break out. Why was it causing Mt. Cinnabar to erupt? All questions which Lily could not waste time pondering. All that mattered was that there were hundreds of innocent people on Cinnabar Island who would soon be burned to ash if they could not get off the island. And from the looks of the eruption, it appeared that they had very little time to escape. The lava, sped on by telekinesis on a level Lily had never seen before, moved with animalistic vengeance, rising off the side of the volcano and plunging to the streets and buildings below as though possessed by ravenous demons. Mewtwo was controlling the lava, she realized in horror. It was trying to destroy Cinnabar, to kill everyone stranded there. The wind out to sea was strong, but she could just make out the terrible sounds of screams, inhuman howls of pain and death and fear, as people rushed en mass to the docks to scramble aboard anything that could float.

There was no time to question how or why; Lily knew she needed to act. She whipped around and spotted one of the sailors that worked on the ship. "You!" she shouted at him. "Lower all your lifeboats and send them back to Cinnabar. Those people need a way off the island."

"I..." he stammered.

"Just do it!"

He seemed to break out of whatever stupor he was in and snapped to attention. "R-Right! Of course, we have to help! Oi, Javier! Get the captain, we've got an emergency situation here!" The sailor called to another of the staff and jogged off.

Dropping her pack right there on the deck, Lily ripped two Pokeballs from her belt and tossed them overboard. Her two Dragonair materialized within a flash of light in the waters below, and Lily quickly vaulted over the railing, Pikachu tucked under her arm. The blue Dragonair rose to catch her as she fell, and she hooked an arm around its sleek body and wrapped her legs around it to hold on.

"Tiny, Shiny! We have to get back to Cinnabar and help those people!" she commanded.

The Dragonair sang as they spread their wing-like head fins and summoned a warm air current to carry them west back to the island. Lily did not wait to see if the ship's crew had begun to deploy the lifeboats. She needed to get back to Cinnabar as fast as possible and help those people.

As she flew back, Lily saw several large Pokemon take to the skies on magnificent blue wings. Charizard, more than likely the CATs, had deployed and were scouring the island looking for survivors. But the lava was moving fast, propelled by unnatural Psychic energy and years worth of compounded malevolent vengeance. Great crests of magma sprouted like sun flares from the streets and attacked buildings and fleeing people and Pokemon alike. As Lily reached the shores, she saw people running through the streets screaming, scrambling over each other to get to safety only to be crushed under a lava lash that melted them to the bones. Tears blurred Lily's eyes as she descended.

"Shiny, help that man!" she shouted at the pink Dragonair cruising alongside her.

Dragonair swooped down and curled around a middle-aged man who was stuck on the roof of a burning building. He screamed as Dragonair scooped him up and a lava plume smashed into the roof where he'd been standing just moments ago.

But Lily could not save everyone. Everywhere she looked, people were buried under molten lava that covered them like a fiery blanket. They sank into it like quicksand, melting instantly. Houses caught fire and collapsed. The elementary school Lily had attended as a child was a burning ruin. The block where her apartment had been was completely gone, consumed by the lava. The CATs swooped and plucked people and Pokemon from the streets like a Crane Game in high speed, but for everyone they saved and safely deposited on a ship at the docks or in the water, three more burned to death.

And above it all, like a mad king who set fire to his kingdom just to see if it would burn, floated Mewtwo. Lily screamed as she urged Dragonair to soar higher, closer to it.

"Tiny, use Dragon Pulse!"

Tiny the blue Dragonair fired a sinister red beam of pure draconian energy that zigzagged skyward toward Mewtwo. For a moment it looked like it would connect, but at the last second an invisible force field materialized around Mewtwo and deflected the beam entirely. Mewtwo turned its gaze on Lily, its normally dark eyes a ghastly white that reminded her of the last time Mewtwo had attacked Gary and her. This time, Blaine was not here to intervene. Luckily, Marla was.

"Fire Blast!" Marla shouted.

She rode a Charizard that let loose a searing column of blue fire at Mewtwo as she swooped past Lily riding the slower Dragonair, but Mewtwo's force field deflected that, too. More Charizard joined the fray as they began to attack Mewtwo directly with Flamethrowers and Fire Blasts and Hyper Beams, a relentless assault. But still, the volcano continued to erupt and decimate the island Lily had called home for as long as she could remember.

"Mewtwo!" she shouted up at the maimed Pokemon. "Please, stop this!"

"No."

The thought, not her own, echoed in her head as though another voice, another consciousness had temporarily taken up residence in her head. It was the most eerie feeling she'd ever experienced, and she stared in horror up at Mewtwo. It was strong enough to communicate without a human mouthpiece now. But *how*?

"An eye for an eye," the voice, Mewtwo's voice, echoed in her head. *"A life for a life."*

"No!" Lily screamed.

The volcano burst with renewed vigor, and she could feel Mewtwo's hatred and pain channeled through the ropes of lava as they crashed to the ground and destroyed everything they touched. The Charizard renewed their assault, opting to attack all at once. Shiny the pink Dragonair soon found Lily, slithering through the air ever higher as it smelled the danger surrounding Mewtwo and let out a mournful note.

"Together," Lily said. "Hyper Beam!"

The two Dragonair added their strength to the Charizard's, and soon Mewtwo disappeared in a conflagration of light and heat as it was assaulted on all sides. The colliding energy beams exploded under the immense pressure, and Lily would have covered her ears if it wouldn't have meant letting go and falling to her death. Black smoke engulfed the space where Mewtwo had been just moments ago, and when the wind began to clear it, Lily was horrified to see that Mewtwo remained unscathed.

It's eyes were no longer glowing white, however, and it seemed to have shifted its focus from the volcano to its force field in order to protect itself. For a few tense moments, Mewtwo stared at the circling Charizard getting ready to attack again. But before anyone could launch a new attack, Mewtwo dropped its force field and propelled itself higher into the air in an arc. Carried on invisible Psychic energy, Mewtwo shot like a rocket through the morning sky to the northwest, a bright white bullet on the horizon. Lily watched it go as suddenly as it had appeared, incredulous.

Below, the volcano's eruption had died down to a slow gurgling as it now leaked lava at a more natural sedate pace. Gone were the horrific lava plumes that rose from the sea of boiling orange like searching sentient tentacles. But the damage was done. Cinnabar burned, and not much of it was left. The docks had been spared, and the plantations far to the north, but the city itself was gone. Boats bumped each other in a frantic race out of the harbor, and people who could not wait to get on boats had leaped into the water to swim in

their mad fear. The S.S. Marigold had dispatched its lifeboats, and they were headed to shore. Aquatic Pokemon caught up to swimming survivors and ferried them to safety aboard whatever vessel was closest. Many had survived, but far more had perished. Lily's tears were hot on her cheeks, and her throat was raw and cramping. She hugged Dragonair, and Pikachu hugged her shoulder and squeaked in fright as it smelled death in the air.

Mewtwo was free, and Blaine had been right. Cinnabar was gone.

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to officially announce that there will be an upcoming fic set in Alola that will focus primarily on that region's main cast of characters. It will also in small part follow the events of Triumvirate, so for any fellow OldRival shippers out there, look forward to seeing guest appearances by Ivy and Gary as they take a long-overdue vacation and end up getting pulled into some more harrowing adventures down in the tropics. No official publishing date as of the time of this chapter update, but expect something in the relatively near future!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ash sprinted down what he hoped was the path to the exit. Each step carried him fifteen feet forward, though he dared jump no higher or farther within the uncertain confines of this godforsaken cave. He hadn't even meant to enter this cave, and if he wasn't being run down by a goddamned stampede, he would not have come in here in the first place hoping to evade death by trampling. As though sensing his inner frustrations, the wall of the cave suddenly sprang up in front of him as he missed a sharp turn in the path and ran smack into it. His armored chest squeezed as all the air left his lungs, and his gloved hands clung to the rocky stone wall to hold him up.

Scrambling, Ash pushed himself off the wall and leaped right just in time to avoid the closest stampeding Donphan that smashed into the wall with Rollout. "Fucking---!"

But Ash's lungs screamed for the air that had left them, and his curses devolved into strangled gurgling as his legs carried him onwards, compelled by the power that lived in him. Whispers erupted in his ears, too loud to ignore, and soon crescendoed to maniacal cachinnations. Two pairs of eyes, one demonic red and the other sinister yellow, blinked within the violet miasma that cloaked Ash's shoulders and swirled around his legs, giving them the power to leap tall buildings---er, caves. The laughter in his head burst again at the inane thought, pleased.

"Glad running for my life's so funny to you, Gengar!" Ash snarled as he continued, in fact, to run for his life.

Something sparked at his feet and squeaked as it dashed, a blur of yellow light faster than Ash and his Ghosts could ever be. Pikachu zigzagged along the path just ahead, erratic in its jerky dashes, and illuminated the path like a living light bulb on crack.

The Donphan had not slowed down and continued to rampage through the cave after Ash. There had to be at least thirty of them, an entire parade he'd stumbled upon accidentally---*accidentally!*---in his exploration earlier this morning. It wasn't like he'd meant to get between that baby Phanpy and its mother. It wasn't like he *asked* Gengar to give the poor thing a hug with its gaseous claws that could rip out a man's soul with a single touch. It wasn't like Mismagius had meant to make it worse by appearing at her full and formidable height to scare Gengar back into submission for being a scoundrel of a Ghost (how dare he give their kind a bad name), while inadvertently tearing the soul out of the little Phanpy, killing it instantly.

A pang of remorse chilled Ash to the bone as though he'd plunged into ice water all of a sudden, and Mismagius's glowing yellow eyes seemed to tear up, if Ghosts could cry. Which they could not because they could not really feel remorse by definition of their very existence, and simply liked to put on a charade mimicking human emotions and eliciting reactions from Ash for the fun of it.

"If you're so sorry, then get me outta here!" Ash shouted at the Ghost. "Like, in one piece!"

The Donphan trumpeted at him as they tore up the cave behind him like they were eating it, and there was nothing left of the world in their wake. Try as he might, Ash was losing ground to them. He could not utilize his Ghosts' full Aura abilities trapped in this narrow tunnel, and he could not risk calling out Venusaur or Blastoise or Snorlax, slow and bulky as they were. There had to be a way out of here, there *had* to be.

He came to another bend in the path and had to leap over a few large rocks, which cost him a bump in the head where he hit the ceiling and went tumbling to the floor. His armor protected him from any real harm, but he lost precious distance in his stumble. Pikachu squeaked up ahead, skidding to a stop to wait for him.

"Go, Pika!" Ash shouted as he raised his left hand. "Gengar, Mismagius, buy me some time!"

The Ghosts' power filled his bones and manifested over his body in the form of thick purple mist. It cloaked his arm and hand in long terrible claws, and from the palm of his spectral hand Ash fired of two Shadow Balls one after the other. The otherworldly cannonballs merged with the three Donphan leading the charge and crippled them. Their legs gave out, and they crashed into the ground and each other, writhing and foaming at the mouth as milky white smoke escaped every orifice of their bodies, taking their souls with it. The Shadow Balls' death by enervation spooked the other charging Donphan, and they trampled their leaders underfoot as they scrambled to get away from them. Unfortunately, there was only one way to go, and that was after Ash. But the ghoulish distraction had bought Ash enough time to get back on his feet and pick up the pace again.

Pikachu exploded with light up ahead, and Ash's heart lifted as he saw what had gotten the little rodent so excited---there was an opening. The closer he got to it, he saw that it was a collapsed entrance with the blue sky visible through the hole above. The collapsed wall, probably the remains of a cave-in, was a good fifty feet high and very steep, impossible to climb without gear and the skill of an expert mountaineer, neither of which Ash had. But he had something a little better.

"Pika!" he shouted for the zippy rodent.

Pikachu leaped into Ash's waiting arms, and Ash leaped straight up towards the skylight with all his might. No sooner did he leave the ground than the nearest Donphan collided with the mountain of debris and set off a mammoth Rockslide that grew in intensity as the other Donphan crashed into the wall and added their strength to the attack. The Ghostly skin Ash wore carried him about thirty feet, so he was forced to touch down and jump again to reach the exit, and he slipped on the tumbling rocks.

"Shit!"

The Donphan were trying to climb up the crumbling wall, all but oblivious to the falling rocks that bounced off their tough armored hides. Ash made a grab with his free hand for anything to use as leverage, but the rock he landed on slipped as it came loose. Pikachu squeaked frantically and clung to the collar of Ash's jacket. His pack was light for an extended camping trip, but he could feel its weight as he all but swam against the tide of falling rocks. The Donphan were slowly gaining on him, and a rock hit him in the shoulder hard enough to paralyze him with pain for a couple seconds. If not for Gengar and Mismagius enveloping him in their protective miasma, he would have already sunken below the landslide. Their whispering voices squabbled in his head as they tried to keep him afloat and help him stand. Behind him, the Donphan raced as quickly as their clobby feet could carry them over the falling rocks, trumpeting their rancor. The exit loomed just twenty feet above, so close.

Ash had an idea just then, and he didn't stop to question it as his body reacted on instinct to the newest lunacy his imagination had dreamed up. He tore a Pokeball from his hip and, channeling the Ghosts' powers of levitation, threw it with everything he had at the exit. Carried on a cushion of spectral mist, the Pokeball soared out the mouth the cave and popped open, revealing a hulking Venusaur with a jagged scar down the length of its left front leg. Ash reached for the behemoth Pokemon and shouted incoherently as another heavy rock smacked him in the small of his back. He'd never drowned in rocks before and wondered what would kill him first, the crushing blows or asphyxiation once he was buried.

But the macabre thought left his mind as thick vines wrapped around his arms and torso and hauled him up bodily. Gengar and Mismagius emerged from Ash's back together, like some ancient evil conjured up from the darkest dankest corner of hell, and dissolved into purple shadows and twinkling eyes as they combined their strength for an enormous Night Shade that engulfed the cavern. The Donphan climbing up the rock wall trumpeted in fear and lost their footing as they stepped over each other to get away from the Ghosts. Most succeeded, but some did not. Ash couldn't see as he was hauled

through the air and more concerned with making sure he didn't drop Pikachu, but he heard the Donphan's screams, almost human in their terror, as their impenetrable armor fractured and imploded, crushing their bones and churning their guts to pulp. It only lasted a moment before Gengar's cackling drowned it out.

Venusaur lifted Ash out of the cave and flung him on the ground in a heap. Pikachu squeaked indignantly from its place smothered beneath Ash and wriggled free in a haste. Ash coughed and groaned as he turned on his side.

"Update: I *still* hate caves," he grumbled.

Venusaur lumbered near---*thump, thump, thump*---and settled a meaty foot inches from Ash's face. He blinked up at it, this huge dinosaur of a Pokemon that had once been small enough to ride around in his arms like Pikachu years ago when it was a little Bulbasaur. The vines slowly untangled themselves from around Ash and retracted at the base of the fuchsia blossom that adorned Venusaur's back.

"Hah, thanks buddy," Ash managed weakly.

Venusaur growled, a pleasantly guttural rumble, and lowered its head to help Ash up. Ash dusted himself off and winced when he moved his right shoulder where a rock had smashed into him. It was sore, but it didn't feel like a major injury. A good night's sleep in a feather bed would do it wonders. Except he didn't have a feather bed, and he hadn't gotten a decent night's sleep in over a week.

A strong wind chilled him to the bones, and Ash shivered. Over his lightweight Brigandine model armor, he wore Mareep wool pants and a red winter jacket, Stantler skin gloves and earmuffs, and a ratty red cap he never left home without. It was only autumn, but this far north in the Silver Mountains, it was cold all year round.

Ash took a moment to check out his new surroundings. He'd emerged in a shallow valley between two tall peaks, far up from the base of the mountains but not high enough that he'd passed the treeline. Pines crowded this valley like giants in green cloaks huddling together against the biting cold. The Silver Mountains were grey stone, snowy peaks, and a network of caves. Ash had been traveling in the mountains for just over a month now, and he'd done a great job of avoiding the caves, happy to hike up the steep mountainsides and brave the gusting winds when there were no outcroppings or valleys such as this one in which to take shelter. Maybe he would have been better insulated from the elements in the caves, and perhaps he would've spent his nights a bit more comfortably with a roof over his head, but again: he *hated* caves. Ever since the experience in Mt. Moon, he'd done his best to avoid them. This time, the Donphan had given him no choice. But this time, he also had a pair of wily Ghosts

up his sleeve.

Speaking of the devils themselves, Mismagius and Gengar coalesced in their corporeal forms around Ash as they slowly emerged from the cave in wisps of violet haze, their duty done. Gengar hopped about on the ground, its mouth ever curled at the sides in a cheshire grin that exposed the rotted teeth of the deformed skull that floated within it. Pikachu chittered at it, and Gengar clutched its belly in a laugh that seemed to echo from everywhere at once. Gengar was a trickster at heart and always looking for ways to prank and pester others for its own amusement. But it got along well enough with Pikachu, and it meant no harm. Unless, of course, Ash was being hunted by a parade of rampaging Donphan out for blood. Then, Gengar relished in delivering harm in ways other Pokemon could never even dream.

Mismagius was the opposite of Gengar in almost every way. It floated in the air like a maiden in a dress, its hem tattered and its wide-brimmed hat indulgent, like a lady's sun hat. But its yellow eyes glowed like a predator's at night, and its smile was a knife wound dripping a tar-like substance that dissolved into nothing as it dribbled down Mismagius's shabby dress. Originally Agatha's Pokemon, Mismagius embodied many of the old crone's qualities, for better or for worse depending on the day. Unlike Gengar, Mismagius was as serious as it was creepy. It never laughed (on rare occasions, it would giggle like a schoolgirl, which was honestly almost worse), and its will could cut deeper than Gengar's. Ash had long ago learned how to tune out Gengar's incessant whispers in his head, dead languages in a thousand voices, but Mismagius's voices were louder and more insistent, perhaps a product of Agatha's wisdom and experience imparted to it. Ash was still learning how to balance the two Ghosts, who could overwhelm him with their emotions if he wasn't very careful.

Venusaur cared very little for the Ghosts. Not much fazed the huge dinosaur, least of all a pair of wispy Ghosts. Venusaur had a thick scar on its leg, a memento of the Siege of Saffron. After the battles it had seen and all its years with Ash as his very first Pokemon, Venusaur was surprised by very little these days.

"Okay," Ash said. "So new rule: Don't kill the baby Phanpy. Got that, Gengar?"

Gengar frowned dramatically.

"No, I don't care how cute they are," Ash said, talking over the whirlwind of susurrations in his head. "That goes for you too, Mismagius."

The whispers filled his ears as Mismagius fretted. Ash rubbed his temples.

"I know you were trying to help, but accidentally killing Phanpy didn't help us at all, did it?"

Mismagius looked defiant, if a Ghost could look defiant, and narrowed its golden eyes like a sullen teenager.

"It's okay, guys, I'm not mad at you," Ash reassured them. "We got outta there, although I kinda feel bad for the Donphan."

Gengar lit up and clapped its hands together.

"*But*, next time you see a baby Pokemon, just leave it alone, okay? This isn't our home. We're strangers here, so we have to play by this place's rules."

Gengar was too excited and leaped at Mismagius in an attempt to tear at its tattered dress. Mismagius did not appreciate Gengar's audacity and opened its mouth impossibly wide in a terrible wail meant to frighten the bejesus out of anyone who heard it. Gengar thought it would be funny to jump inside that enormous mouth, and Mismagius swallowed it whole.

"Okay, cut it out," Ash said, trying not to laugh despite the ridiculous sight. No matter his mood, Gengar seemed to always find a way to lighten it. "Seriously, stop before I---oh, gross!" Ash burst out laughing when Mismagius pooped Gengar out.

Venusaur growled, bored and perpetually hungry as it sniffed the air for prey that might be lurking in the pine forest. Pikachu cocked its heat cutely, unsure what was so funny.

"You guys're ridiculous. Don't look at me like that, Mismagius, you definitely bring it out of him," Ash said, smiling. "Ahhh, okay, so thanks for getting me outta that cave, by the way. C'mon, let's find someplace to camp for the night." He gestured for his Pokemon to follow, and they happily did.

The valley was sheltered from the worst of the elements nestled between two peaks. It was small wonder that a number of Pokemon made their homes here. Spearow nested in the pines, and Skarmory made their nests directly in the mountainsides. Herds of Stantler and Sawsbuck wandered the pine forest foraging for food, but Venusaur's scent spooked them. Ledyba and Ledian buzzed in the canopy, and Raticate made their dens in the ground. It was after the Raticate that Venusaur went, using its sensitive nose to sniff out the burrows and its vines to fish out the rats to eat whole.

Ash got to work setting up a lean-to shelter, and he released Blastoise and Snorlax both to let them forage for food and as a message to the wild Pokemon in the area---if the Ghosts did not scare them away, a fifteen-foot-tall Snorlax sure as hell ought to. There was no shortage of firewood to be had here, and with the help of the machete Ash had brought with him, he'd hacked apart a dead log and carried two armfuls of firewood back to his shelter. By the time he

was done setting everything up, twilight was upon him and the first stars began to peek out from the blanket of night.

Once the fire pit was dug and ensconced in stones, he reached for Charizard's Ultra Ball for a quick blaze, but when the Ultra Ball popped open and nothing came out, Ash just stared at the fire pit and his hand fell. Wordlessly, he closed the Ultra Ball and returned it to his pocket.

Pikachu squeaked up at him, as though it could sense something was wrong. Ash sniffled and rubbed his nose, and he forced himself to breathe, deep and shuddering.

"Stupid," he said, barely above a whisper. "Charizard's gone. I knew that."

He'd known it for a long time, more than eight months now since the day it had happened. And yet, he sometimes caught himself in moments like this one, surrounded by his Pokemon and happy, and forgetting just for a second that things were different. That Charizard was not coming back. Ash's hands were shaking in his deerskin gloves.

"Hey, Pika," he said. "Thundershock for me, will ya?"

Pikachu jumped to comply, and the sparks from its weak attack were enough to get the brittle wood burning until the embers worked up a good blaze.

Ash sighed and sat down. Pikachu jumped into his lap, wanting a scratch behind its ears as it nuzzled him affectionately.

"I miss him," Ash said aloud. "God, I miss him."

Pikachu looked up at Ash and blinked its large dark eyes, curious as ever. Charizard and Pikachu had always gotten along quite well, to Ash's puzzlement. The overgrown lizard had always resented him a little, always so stubborn and obdurate and a general pain in the ass about every little thing. But Charizard had been a good Pokemon, probably his best, if he was being honest. It had saved his life many times, and it had saved Lily's life when it counted the most at the cost of its own life. Ash rubbed his eyes, feeling the sting of tears and willing them away before they could fall.

I miss him so much.

Blastoise and Venusaur hunkered down by the fire, drawn to the warmth and to Ash. Venusaur dropped a dead Spearow at Ash's feet that it had snatched mid-flight with its vines, and Ash began to de-feather it and roast it for his dinner with a word of thanks. Snorlax, at home in the mountain terrain, would likely be off foraging for food for hours, but it would return either when it was sated or it had consumed everything edible in the vicinity, whichever came first.

Gengar and Mismagius, requiring no food at all, danced around the fire. Ghosts had a mysterious fondness for flames, Ash had discovered. Perhaps it was their transient nature, or their seeming innocuousness.

While no harm in a contained setting, if set free they could wreak havoc and death upon anything they touched, much like a Ghost. But also like a Ghost, the flames needed something to sustain them, a tether. Whatever the reason, Gengar delighted in morphing into various shapes and casting shadows.

Ash smiled as he watched Gengar morph into the shape of a Pikachu and attempt to goad the real Pikachu. Pikachu chittered happily at the game, and then Gengar got bored and morphed into a Corphish, then into a Golem, then into a Donphan like the ones that had chased them.

"That one's easy, it's Teddiursa," Ash said, naming off the shapes Gengar made with its shadow while Mismagius looked on, bemused. This reminded him of another game of charades Ash had played long ago with his closest friends on a deserted island chasing myths.

Gengar morphed again, this time into a winged creature that looked like a Dragonite, and Ash's smile fell. "Gengar, go find Snorlax," he said. "He's probably eating the whole forest."

Gengar resumed its original form and balanced on one foot like some circus performer, but at the thought of finding Snorlax, it grinned deviously. Snorlax was the only one of Ash's Pokemon that actively seemed to like having Gengar around, content to let it bounce on its ample belly, pester it endlessly with silly faces, and otherwise indulge Gengar's antics where the others opted to ignore it or flee from its natural putrid stench that had long ago stopped bothering Ash. Ivy had once joked that Snorlax couldn't smell anything but food, so of course it wouldn't mind Gengar's rotten smell when you got too close to it. Maybe that was true, Ash wasn't sure. But either way, Gengar dissolved into violet gas and faded into the night.

Ash finished roasting the Spearow and helped himself to the meat right off the spit with his bare hands. Mismagius hovered above, ever curious about the habits of humans, but it did not try to interfere as Gengar would have. Pikachu happily accepted some of the meat and nibbled quietly on its haunches. It was a beautiful night, like most nights out here in the wilds north of Indigo Plateau. The stars dotted the night sky like so many twinkling dew drops, and the crackling fire kept Ash warm enough. Perhaps tonight he would get a good night's sleep.

The moon was nearly full tonight and high in the sky. In the distance, Lycanroc howled their melancholy song, elegiac and lovely in its sadness. Lycanroc were not a common sight in Kanto and Johto, preferring to live deep in the mountains away from people. Ash had never seen one, but the Rangers at Indigo Plateau had warned him about them when he announced his intentions to come out here on his own. Huge wolves as large as Arcanine, Lycanroc were said to be

solitary hunters whose howling served to warn others of their kind not to trespass on their hunting grounds. Ash hoped he wouldn't run into one, but he'd be ready if he did. Wolves did not scare him after all the things he'd seen.

The Lycanroc howled again, a lonely tune that reminded Ash a little of Dragonair's singing. Thinking of Dragonair made him think of Lily, and he smiled sadly. She'd been very brave supporting his quest to come out here, but he knew her too well. She'd be missing him terribly by now. Lily wasn't the type to enjoy solitude, always wanting to be surrounded by others unless she was deep in her work. Not like Ash, who never minded being alone if he had to be, though he missed his friends. Ivy would have loved it out here, he was sure. All the dark and quiet and solitude would suit her well. Gary would have appreciated the chance to observe so many wild and rare Pokemon in their natural habitat largely untouched by man. Lily probably wouldn't have enjoyed this as much. She was tough when she wanted to be, but she was made for laboratories, not mountain wildernesses. He wondered what she was up to now.

Pikachu yawned and wandered onto Ash's lap, ready for sleep. But Ash was wide awake, that incident with the Donphan earlier still fresh in his mind. It was not the first brush with mortality he'd had out here by any means, and after so many near-death encounters, one would think he'd be used to it by now. But the closer Ash came to death and eluded it every time, the more he dwelled on it.

Back in Indigo Plateau, he had a million things to do every day. There was always some problem or other happening on the mainland, be it Kanto or Johto, and while the Indigo Rangers handled most of the disputes on the Elite Four's behalf, Ash preferred to take a more hands-on approach. In the last eight months, he'd visited Olivine, Goldenrod, Mahogany, Saffron, Celadon, and Lavender Town to meet with various Gym Leaders and civilian leaders, leaving his fellow Elites to keep the watch on Mt. Silver in his absence. He'd seen for himself the grievances Johto held against Kanto, and the mistrust Kanto held for Johto. He'd taken it upon himself to galvanize the Indigo Rangers towards fostering a lasting peace between the two continents that shared one land and one Pokemon League. Some, like Gym Leader Whitney of Goldenrod, were amenable to cooperation, although Ash knew Lyra's old position as a former Goldenrod Gym trainer probably had something to do with that. Others, like Olivine's Gym Leader Jasmine, were less enthusiastic. Ash knew Lyra had something to do with that one, too. One day, he'd have to get the full story from Ethan about what the hell had happened between them and Jasmine. Just as Ash and his friends had made friends and enemies in their travels throughout Kanto battling Team Rocket, so

too did Ethan and Marco and Lyra in Johto. But peace persisted despite the grievances many still felt, and slowly agreements were made, documents signed, and handshakes photographed. Despite its problems, the mainland seemed to be heading towards a bright, if not a bit distant, future.

With the advent of success on the horizon, it came as a little bit of a shock to Ash's fellow Elites when he announced he was going north into the Silver Mountains alone to train. Chuck had been pleased that Ash was finally going to beef up a bit with some solo training and gave him a hearty slap on the back that had nearly broken a rib. Surge had not liked the idea and accused Ash of wanting to go on some self-aggrandizing hero quest like a hormonal teenager.

"Just go get laid, kid. That'll scratch whatever itch yer feelin'," Surge had said dismissively.

Unfortunately, Violet had been in earshot when he'd said it, and she nearly burst a blood vessel screaming at him about toxic masculinity and some other stuff Ash hadn't quite understood at the time. He was too busy trying to reassure Lily, who'd gone red in the face and looked ready to keel over, that Surge was just kidding.

Lily took Ash's decision to leave the hardest, but she was also the most supportive in the end. She got it, this desire to figure things out when you'd been thrown into a world you didn't ask for and didn't really understand. Ivy and Gary were different. They took to this new existence, being Tamers, like they'd been born to it. Well, Gary had been born to it, Ash supposed, and Ivy might as well have been growing up around Team Rocket's violence. But Ash was a country boy with a mom he loved and a house with marks on the wall measuring his height and an innocent sense of adventure. Now, he was...something else.

Across the fire, Venusaur was busy primping and cleaning its heavy flower with its vines, an odd contradiction while it had bits of Raticate flesh stuck in its teeth and speckles of blood on its snout. Blastoise was more concerned with getting some sleep and had retreated inside its shell. Pikachu snoozed in Ash's lap, soaking up his warmth and the fire's. Only Mismagius seemed concerned with Ash as it drifted down from the canopy to settle next to him. Whispers in his head intensified as the Ghost communicated with him in its cryptic way. Ash could never understand what the Ghosts said, only what they felt. Agatha had told him once that Ghosts were native to another plane parallel to this one and that they could only exist here by possessing people, such as Mediums like Ash, or objects or land rife with spiritual energy. It made sense, then, that their language, so many dead tongues, would be incomprehensible even to a Medium. Although, Ash still wondered if somewhere in there among all the

voices, there was one that he might be able to understand if only he could pick it out above the rest. He'd never been able to do it, though.

Right now, Mismagius was sharing feelings of concern and sadness. It could not speak in the normal sense save for a few words it might channel in times of heightened stress or emotion, but it knew Ash's psyche nearly as well as Gengar now. It knew him perhaps better than any person might.

"I'm okay," Ash reassured the Ghost as a tremor of despair washed through him. "I can be sad and still be okay."

Mismagius thrummed with curiosity. It was the oddest sensation, like a probing of the mind. Curiosity felt ticklish, while sadness felt cold and heavy. Ash wrung his hands to dispel the tickling sensation the Ghost emanated.

"I guess... I guess I'm still not over everything that happened. Charizard, well, I guess you never met Charizard properly. You probably woulda hated him. He was such an ass."

Mismagius undulated, and the flames danced in its yellow eyes.

"I know he's gone, I know. I just... I miss him."

The fire crepitated pleasantly, and in the distance Lycanroc howled its melancholy song, warning off creatures of the night and tolling the death knell of whatever was foolish enough to be caught out in the moonlight.

"I miss him," Ash repeated. "I miss Professor Oak, too. God, how does Agatha do it? You know her better than I do, right?"

Mismagius peered at Ash, curious in a way only a Ghost can truly manage. Curious, but also pitying, and a little bit sad. As if to say, 'Poor human, you know nothing.'

"Charizard wasn't even the first, you know. I lost Pidgeotto back in Viridian Forest. It happened so fast, and I..." He laughed bitterly. "Can you believe I forgot about it for a while? I was so caught up in all the fighting, and I just forgot about Pidgeotto. I raised him up from a tiny Pidgey, and then he just..."

Ash stared into the fire, not really seeing it.

"One day, I know I'll wake up and it'll be Mom who's gone," he said, barely audible. "And then Surge, Misty, Ivy and Gary, and then Lily... And I'll still be here. With you."

Mismagius smiled that ghastly smile, and a surge of heat raced up Ash's spine and warmed his insides, soothing the aches in his shoulder and back from the day's beatings. Mismagius's happiness was so intense that Ash could not help but smile, and he slapped a hand over his mouth to wipe it away, the elation so at odds with the fear and trepidation and sadness he felt. He squeezed his eyes shut at the foreign emotions that filled him, that he didn't feel but was forced to feel. Mismagius was strong, and he was still getting the hang of

tempering its emotions. Agatha had trained it very well.

No one really knew where Ghost Pokemon came from, only that they did not originate in this world. That was why they could only survive here under the appropriate conditions. Ash wondered.

"That place you come from," Ash said. "Do you ever want to go back?"

Mismagius watched him, unblinking, and its happy warmth receded. There was nothing, no thrum of feeling and no whispers. He could still feel the Ghost as a part of him, a part that never left him, but there was nothing beyond that connection in that moment, like it had withdrawn and showed him the cold shoulder.

The ground shook and a tree snapped at the base and toppled over several yards from Ash's camp. Snorlax lumbered out of the woods covered in pine needles, and Gengar floated around it grinning maniacally. Snorlax's muzzle was stained brown from whatever it had found to eat in the forest. It found a place close to the fire and plopped down on its haunches, yawned, and settled on its back for a nice long nap. The force with which Snorlax hit the ground was strong enough to startle Blastoise out of its shell. The huge turtle readied its cannons and looked around, ready for a fight, but there was none to be had. Gengar burst out laughing as it bounced merrily upon Snorlax's tubby belly as though it were a trampoline. Mismagius stared at its fellow Ghost with unmistakable disdain.

Ash got up and set Pikachu on the ground by the fire. He walked around the campfire and patted Snorlax on its tummy, though the huge bear did not stir. "Thanks, Gengar."

Gengar was looking very smug as it reached for Ash and merged with him. The Ghost floated over Ash as a half-formed creature shrouded in mist. Mismagius did not want to be left out and joined them, also merging with Ash over his other shoulder. Gengar stuck out its rotted tongue and made a face at Mismagius over Ash's head.

"I'm gonna get some sleep," he announced. "And tomorrow, I better not be chased by wild Donphan again."

Gengar and Mismagius fell suddenly quiet and retreated deeper within him, as though he'd forget they were there. In many ways, the Ghosts were like petulant children when they weren't ripping the souls from anyone or anything that would do Ash harm.

Ash quickly got ready for bed and scooped up Pikachu to settle into the sleeping bag together. The little rodent was exhausted from the day's events and barely stirred. Ash fell asleep watching the stars through the pines, so many and so far away, knowing his Pokemon would keep him safe in the night to live another day.

Ash spent the next several days in the valley. It was relatively safe here so long as he didn't approach the herds of wild Stantler and

Sawsbuck directly. Unused to humans this far north, the normally shy deer were not afraid of him and watched him very carefully whenever they saw him in the forest. Ash had to resort to using Gengar and Mismagius to separate a young Stantler fawn from the rest of the herd in order to trap it. The Ghosts did not like the deer much, both species being of the Normal type that tended to be oblivious to their taunts and spectral touches. But even deer could get scared, and the Ghosts proved useful at getting the herd to scatter. After that, it was a simple matter of Pikachu's well-timed Thunderbolt and some work with a carving knife Chuck had given Ash as a gift for his last birthday, and Ash had all the food he'd need for at least a week.

Roasting the strips of meat drew hungry noses out of the wilderness---a feral clowder of Persian a deal larger and fiercer than their mainland counterparts. But one whiff of Snorlax and they melted back into darkness. There did not seem to be anything bigger in this area, for which Ash was thankful. After the incident with the Donphan, he was enjoying some downtime without having to look over his shoulder every five minutes.

Still, it would be time for him to move on soon. He didn't want to spend more than a few days in one place, and most often he found himself on the move after just one night. Not particularly because he wanted to explore more of the mountains, but because no place remained safe for long, even a sheltered valley like this one. Tonight it was feral Persian sniffing after him; perhaps tomorrow it would be something a hell of a lot bigger and braver. His three main offensive Pokemon were all tough and bulky, but they were equally hindered by their ungainly slowness. Should Ash encounter something fast, like a pack of crepuscular Houndoom, he might be in some real trouble if they caught him by surprise in the dark. But if he kept moving, he would be harder to pin down.

Grudgingly, he admitted that he might be safer from predators in a cave, but there was no way he was going that route unless it was a life and death situation. There were other beasts that lurked in caves, ones far bigger than howling Houndoom or stalking Persian.

It snowed on his fourth day in the pine valley, and he took that as his cue to get moving. The flakes were large and fluffy, and they didn't stick to the ground. Still, snow this early in autumn did not sit well with Ash. He'd had a bad experience fighting a certain Crystallos a year or so back on Cinnabar Island, and he had no great love for snow and sleet and cold ever since.

As he packed up his little camp and doused and stomped out the fire pit, Ash thought about how convenient it would be to have Charizard with him out here. He could Fly wherever he wanted to go, and Charizard's natural heat could have kept him warm in snow or

shine. Flying would also probably be the safest way to travel, that is, if he didn't run into nesting Skarmory or Pidgeot's hunting grounds. The wild Pidgeot in the Silver Mountains were known to be as fierce as Braviary, their distant cousins native to Unova, and would attack even fully-grown Stantler. Okay, so maybe not *safe*, per se, but flying would definitely have been a more comfortable way to travel.

It took him a moment to realize he'd stopped moving and held a thermos in front of him mid-packing. Gengar was looking at him with a frown, and Ash felt a tremor of tingling concern coming from the Ghost. Ash sighed and packed the rest of his things.

"Sorry, buddy," he said. "I guess out here, it's easier to think about the sad stuff when nobody's around to distract me."

But that was why he'd come out here, wasn't it? To reflect on the things that had happened to him because he'd never really found the time to do it back in Indigo Plateau or visiting his mother or moving on with his life like all of those things had happened to someone else a long time ago. He wanted time, and he wanted answers. For all the things that had happened and everything he'd learned about himself and this world, there were a million other things he did not know and that no one seemed equipped to explain. Like, why was he even here? Why was he a Medium? It was thanks to all that that he'd gotten wrapped up in the affairs of the Kanto mainland and ended up losing first Pidgeotto and then Charizard, not to mention Oak himself. What did it all mean? And why him?

Gengar balanced on one foot and hopped around catching snowflakes on its tongue, an attempt to cheer Ash up. Ash smiled tiredly as he watched the snowflakes pass through Gengar's gaseous body and turn black with rot, appreciating the Ghost's concern. Pikachu squeaked and shook itself out under a nearby tree. It did not appreciate the snow coating its fur.

"Pika, to me," Ash said.

Pikachu happily scampered up Ash's offered arm and perched on his shoulder in the hood of his jacket, using it like a makeshift blanket. With Blastoise, Venusaur, and Snorlax back in their Pokeballs, all that remained were the two Ghosts that merged with Ash. Mismagius lay dormant within Ash, resting, while Gengar occupied the shoulder Pikachu did not. Ash shielded his eyes from the snowfall and looked around.

"Well, let's see what's on the other side of that mountain," he said.

Gengar cackled and merged with Ash, bathing him in eerie violet light that molded to his shape. Pikachu squeaked and burrowed deeper into Ash's hood. Ash tugged down on the bill of his ratty red cap and took off at a jump. With Gengar's Aura, he could clear a jump thirty feet long and twenty feet high. Snow stung his cheeks and

turned black as ash on contact with Gengar's Aura, but the feel of the frigid wind was a welcome one. Never had Ash breathed air as crisp and fresh as this mountain air. In just four leaps, he was clear of the valley pine forest and headed northeast according to the small compass he carried, though the sky was so grey and overcast that there was no way of finding the sun.

From so high up, Ash could see for miles even in the snow. On a far mountainside to the west, he saw a female Pyroar run down a Skiddo and latch onto its haunches with Fire Fang. Pyroar's fiery crest smoked as the falling snow melted upon it, and Skiddo bleated in terror and pain as cinders burned its lichen-infested hide. It tried to buck and gouge Pyroar's soft belly with its wicked horns, but Pyroar had a good grip far enough back and broke Skiddo's leg. It was over in a matter of seconds, and Skiddo went down hard. The rest of its flock had sprinted over the craggy crevasses and jutting boulders across the mountainside, sure-footed and fast and far out of reach of the lone lioness. But it didn't matter now that she'd made her kill. If she had Litleo cubs to feed back in her den, they would not go hungry tonight.

"Whoa," Ash said as he watched nature's violent beauty unfold before his eyes. "Let's maybe not go that way..."

Gengar's lurid eyes materialized over his shoulder, drawn by the sight of killing, and Ash could feel its deflated disappointment that they weren't going to check out the sight of the hunt. As they continued to leap across the mountain, the gale-force winds brewed fiercely and the snows fell in nearly horizontal paths that buffeted Ash askance from his intended path. The flakes hit his cheeks like little razors, and he tugged his red scarf tighter around his neck and mouth and pulled the bill of his cap down lower over his eyes. It didn't help much.

Gotta get out of the storm before it gets really bad, he thought miserably.

There were many openings in the mountainside denoting entrances to caves, but Ash stubbornly avoided them. It was fine, he'd just get to the leeward side of the peak to the east and find some shelter from the elements there. The valley he'd left was starting to feel very nostalgic right about then, but in this heavy snowfall he'd get buried without a roof over his head. Better to find higher ground.

Pikachu sparked nervously in his hood and sneezed, delivering a small jolt down Ash's spine that made him wince. His armor was rubber-lined and shock proof, but with Pikachu nuzzling up to the back of his neck, there was little protection from its electrified sneezes.

"Stay warm, Pika," he said over the howling winds. "I'll find us some shelter soon enough."

The eastern side of the mountain was sheltered from the winds, but the snows had picked up considerably and Ash had to use his flight goggles to keep his vision clear. There was an overhang that looked sheltered from the worst of the snowfall, weathered over many years of wind and snow erosion. If he could get there and huddle up at the very back, he might pass a decent night of not freezing to death once he got a fire going. Determined, Ash jumped towards the overhang with Gengar's help, though he had to watch his landings as the wind pulled him this way and that and threatened to flip him over in midair.

The overhang sheltered a strip of stone and gravel that looked even enough, and as Ash got closer, he noticed a large crack in the mountainside that led to another cave. But it was no matter. There was shelter enough under the lip of the overhang, and now that he was on the leeward side of the mountain, he didn't have snow gusting in his face. He just had to find some firewood. First, though, he would find a good spot to leave his pack and unburden himself.

"Well, Pika? Welcome to the luxurious Overhang Suites, where we've got the softest slanted stone floors this side of Indigo Plateau," Ash said as he kneeled down and assessed the angle of the ground.

Pikachu hopped down from Ash's hood and paced the area, its furry tail erect and sparking. Gengar materialized in its solid form and waddled around the far side of the overhang. Ash didn't bother to call it back; Gengar was always connected to him and could not go anywhere that Ash could not find it. The reverse was also true. Perhaps it had found something shiny or something dead that it wanted to check out. Both lured the Ghost like a Cutiefly to honey.

Ash had paced most of the space, which was a crescent about twenty-five yards deep and fifty yards wide, and he thought he found a decent enough spot where the ground wasn't terribly slanted that he could set up a sleeping bag and build a fire. All of a sudden, Mismagius awoke and materialized next to Ash.

"Hey, sleep well?" he asked.

Mismagius was not looking at him. Instead, it was drawn to the other side of the overhang where Gengar was exploring near the craggy cave opening. Mismagius drifted towards Gengar without so much as a glance at Ash, and he frowned.

"Did you guys find something?"

Pikachu cocked its head and squeaked, equally puzzled, and Ash scooped up the little rodent.

"C'mon, Pika. Let's go see what they found."

Ash jogged after Mismagius with Pikachu on his shoulder. The cave opening, now that he was right in front of it, was much larger than it had looked leaping through the sky. It looked like some god of

old had struck the mountainside with thunder and opened up a huge wound in the stone. Gravel crunched under Ash's foot, but when he kneeled down to check it out, he wasn't sure exactly what he was looking at. Mixed in with the stones and pebbles were chips of white and beige and brown, some bigger chunks than others. He picked up a larger misshapen chip of white and turned it over in his hands.

Gengar's excitement hit him like the urge to laugh, and Ash looked up to see what had the Ghost so captivated. It was something shiny, after all, but when Ash bent to pick it up, he had the strangest sense of deja-vu. It was a hunk of metal that fit in his palm, twisted and rusted from exposure to the elements, but he could just make out some symbol on its face. It was a four-faced shield, badly scratched but still recognizable to someone who'd come to know that symbol like the back of his hand over the last few months. It was the symbol of the Indigo Rangers.

"What's a Ranger badge doing all the way out here?" Ash asked.

Mismagius thrummed in trepidation, a clammy feeling that made Ash sweat uncomfortably under his collar despite the cold. He was about to get up, but something on the ground caught his attention. It was another of those brownish-white chippings, but this one was larger and recognizable for what it was. Ash picked up the chunk and turned it over in his hand. It was the remains of a crushed human skull, the nose holes and one eye socket clearly visible, and a few teeth from the upper mandible still in place. Pikachu squeaked, ears twitching and its nose in the air. Ash swallowed hard.

"Oh," he said, setting the skull remains back down. "That's what."

He stood up, and it seemed that everywhere he looked around the mouth of the cave, pieces of crushed bones, both human and Pokemon, littered the ground. He backed up a step, the twisted Ranger badge clutched tightly in his gloved hand. Something moved in his periphery vision, and he snapped his head up. There was only inky darkness beyond in the cave.

"Gengar, Mismagius," he called to the Ghosts. "I think we better find another place to camp tonight."

Something rumbled in the cave, Ash was sure of it. That was definitely not the wind, no, this was deeper, more guttural, alive. The old burns on his back and shoulders itched under his armor and clothes as they were wont to do whenever dread and fear began to niggle under Ash's skin. Honestly, what could a guy who spent most of his time socializing with Ghosts have to fear? And yet...

The rumbling from the cave grew louder, and Ash backed up some more. Gengar and Mismagius were more curious than afraid and sent waves of frustration and dismay at Ash when he called them back. They wanted to explore and see what was in that scary dark cave.

"Guys," he called to the Ghosts as he went for a Pokeball at his belt instinctively. "Come on."

Something crunched in the darkness, and the rumbling sounded again, this time very close. Growling, to be more accurate. Pikachu squeaked nervously. From within the darkness, something grey and leathery emerged. It took Ash a moment to realize that at his eye-level, he was only seeing the creature's armored belly. His red eyes drifted up and up until they landed on an open mouth, sharp yellowed teeth, and a wicked horn as long as Ash's arm that could spin and pierce through the toughest stone and shale. Or crush a human skull.

"Shit, run!" Ash said as he turned tail and did just that.

The Rhyperior, larger than any mere Rhydon he'd ever seen before, took a moment to find him scrambling away as fast as he could, and then it roared like some beast from the underworld ready to feast on the free meal that had stupidly wandered right up to its front door. Gengar cackled and dissolved into mist as it followed Ash and merged with him. Mismagius was close behind and melted into him, too, and soon Ash was leaping out of the mountain cove back into the blistering snow storm. Rhyperior was right on his tail and roared again as it jumped deftly out of the sheltering overhang and began to chase Ash down the mountainside to the valley of boulders and broken trees below.

Shit, shit, shit! was all Ash could think as he willed his legs to jump farther. The Rhyperior was enormous, taller even than Snorlax, and probably well over a hundred years old. Unlike its pre-evolution, Rhyperior's already tough shale scale skin was reinforced with orange granite plates. The last time he'd run for his life from a Rhydon, it could breathe fire and left him with near-fatal burns on his back and shoulders. This Rhyperior couldn't breathe fire, but it was evolved, bigger, stronger, and fucking fast with gravity on its side and right at home in the harsh mountain environment. The snow made it hard to see, and Ash nearly lost his footing slipping on an icy boulder. It was enough time for Rhyperior to hurl an enormous boulder at Ash. The reckless Rock Wrecker attack clipped him in the knee, a glancing blow thanks to the Ghosts but painful nonetheless. Ash cried out and fell back to the ground on his uninjured foot.

There was no way he'd outrun this thing, not on its home turf and not in this storm. But if he sent his Ghosts after it, he'd be vulnerable and slow on his own. Rhyperior roared and lowered its head for a wicked Megahorn attack meant to impale Ash through the stomach. Thinking quickly, Ash tore a Pokeball from his belt and released Blastoise, who landed on all fours on the ground in front of him facing uphill. The sight of the charging Rhyperior told the blue turtle all it needed to know, and it quickly armed its blasting cannons.

"Hydro Pump!" Ash shouted as he leaped to safety behind Blastoise.

Blastoise let loose twin jets of water that slammed into Rhyperior and knocked it off balance, but the huge rhino did not lose its footing and kept coming. Ash threw Snorlax's Pokeball next, and big bear yawned, disoriented.

"Snorlax, wake up and help Blastoise!"

Rhyperior slammed its clubby fists into the ground again, this time setting off an Earthquake that rearranged the chewed up valley floor. From the already ruined state of things---the cracked boulders and snapped trees---Ash wondered if this Rhyperior wasn't responsible for the destruction that had already existed here before Ash ever arrived. Cursing, he retrieved the Pokedex from his pocket and scanned Rhyperior.

"Lives alone... Carnivorous and violent... Its granite-plated skin is so tough it can withstand molten lava? What the fuck is this?!" Ash scanned Oak's old research notes.

It was already bigger than Snorlax and now, apparently, impervious to goddamned *lava*. The Indigo Rangers had warned Ash and the other Elites about the rare terror known as Rhyperior that ruled the Silver Mountains. A Rhyperior had wandered south once in its old age, and the former Elite Four Bruno, supposedly the strongest Bellator on the continent at the time, had lost a Machamp and a freaking *Onix* to its wrath before finally bringing it down. And that one had been in the winter of its life. It was no wonder few people trained Rhyperior. Even for the Rock and Ground Adamantines the Rhyhorn line favored, it took far longer than a natural human lifetime for a Rhyhorn to reach its final evolutionary stage. But in the wild, Rhyperior were not constrained by human limitations or encroachment. Here, Rhyperior was king of the wilds, and Ash had just shown up unannounced on this one's front lawn.

"Why is this shit always happening to me!" Ash shouted in frustration.

Thankfully, Snorlax was awake and aware of the danger, and it loped on all fours after Rhyperior now. Head lowered and glowing white with raw power, Snorlax rammed Rhyperior in its side, and this time the force of the Giga Impact was enough to knock the behemoth over. Rhyperior skidded over the gravel downhill, giving Blastoise enough time to get out of the way even at its slow pace. Ash himself kept a careful distance, but he didn't want to be too far away from his Pokemon in this storm.

Snorlax shook out its head, and Ash was horrified to see that it had sustained a deep gash on its forehead. Blood ran down its muzzle and dyed the frost accumulating around its jowls a sickly shade of pink.

Rhyperior looked no worse for wear as it struggled to get to its feet with the help of a deft tail that looked more like a wrecking ball than a normal tail. One hit from that and every bone in Ash's body would shatter to dust.

"I'm supposed to outlive everybody I know," Ash said through gritted teeth, his knee aching where Rhyperior's Rock Wrecker had grazed him before. "Not even Rhyperior's gonna change that. Blastoise! Hit it again!"

Blastoise obeyed and got a good grip on the rocks before launching another Hydro Pump at Rhyperior while it was still getting back to its feet.

"Gengar, help Snorlax!"

Gengar rose from Ash's shoulders and shot through the air like a purple bullet, laughing all the way. It hovered over Snorlax's shoulders like a little thundercloud, just two gleaming red eyes and a clacking skull hidden in the depths.

Rhyperior struggled against the onslaught of water, and the snow began to cling to its wet hide and coat it in a thin layer of frost. Even so, the goliath Pokemon was not deterred and charged directly at Blastoise, its wicked horn spinning in the beginnings of a fatal Horn Drill attack. Ash froze with fear, memories of the last time Blastoise had been on the receiving end of a Horn Drill attack back in Mt. Moon when it was still a Wartortle and had nearly died saving Ash.

"No!" Ash leaped towards Blastoise with Mismagius's help, desperate to get to it before Rhyperior did.

Snorlax fired off a Shadow Beam, its combination Hyper Beam attack with Gengar's Shadow Ball. The violet energy bolt struck Rhyperior in the back and ripped off a layer of super hard orange granite. Spectral energy seeped in between Rhyperior's tough scales and turned them to rot, but Rhyperior was still going and Blastoise was not a fast Pokemon.

"No, not again!" Ash shouted as tears flooded his vision and he reached for Blastoise scrambling to get away as fast as it could.

Seeing that it would not escape, Blastoise Withdrew into its enormous shell and prepared for impact. Rhyperior landed upon Blastoise and drove its spinning Horn Drill into the back of Blastoise's shell. Sparks erupted from the point of contact, then smoke, then a terrible screeching sound like nails on a chalkboard. Ash flew at Rhyperior and reached with his extended violet claws, ready to rip out Rhyperior's very soul with his spectral touch.

But just then, something materialized in between Rhyperior and Blastoise, something dark and baleful that seemed to grow out of nothing at all. Mismagius screamed in Ash's head, a cacophony of whispers that roared harder than the wind, and nearly crippled him

mid-flight. The dark energy grew into a force field between Rhyperior and Blastoise, engorging as Rhyperior's horn continued to spin until it curved around Rhyperior and attempted to swallow the beast whole. Sensing the threat, Rhyperior withdrew and swung around with its wrecking ball of a tail, but it passed right through the ominous energy and convulsed in pain.

Ash remembered himself and quickly jumped to Blastoise's side. Its shell was scuffed and cracked at the surface, but the damage was superficial and would heal with time. Blastoise poked its meaty head out of the shell and made a hissing sound. Ash could have kissed the blue turtle.

"Oh my god, Blastoise, you thick-shelled son of a bitch."

Ash hugged Blastoise's impenetrable shell and shook with relief. He wasn't sure if he could take it again, losing another Pokemon. He wasn't sure if he'd survive it this time.

Beyond, the dark force that had engulfed Rhyperior receded to a very small point on the ground no bigger than Pikachu. Ash jogged to it, and Pikachu jumped down from its hiding place in his hood.

"What the... Banette?" Ash said, recognizing the dirty rag doll Ghost.

Banette, of a height with Pikachu, smiled up at Ash through its zipper mouth and made a rattling sound. It was giggling, he realized.

Snorlax roared and pawed the ground, ready to challenge Rhyperior again, but as the huge rhino recovered from the pain of Banette's Phantom Force attack, something very strange happened. Blue wisps of fire materialized out of thin air, a dozen of them, and formed a spinning ring before Rhyperior's head. Hypnotic, the fire danced like so many tiny spirits from another dimension, exotic and alluring.

Rhyperior seemed to forget all about Ash as it watched the Will-O-Wisps and slowly lumbered after them back up the mountain. It shook out its broad head as though groggy and waddled back to the overhang where it made its home like nothing had happened.

"Okay...?" Ash said.

Snorlax snorted and stamped the ground with its big paws, probably hungry after all that effort. It ambled towards Ash and butted his chest with its wet nose.

"Oh, buddy, you're bleeding," Ash said.

Gengar materialized on Snorlax's head looking particularly pleased with itself.

"So're you," a familiar voice said from behind.

Ash whirled and stared in shock at the last person he expected to run into out here. "Morty?"

Morty, the Ecruteak City Gym Leader, looked no different from the

last time Ash had seen him on Cinnabar Island nearly a year ago---same surfer blond hair, same square jaw, same thoughtful haunted eyes. He was covered in winter gear from head to toe and wore goggles to protect him from the blinding snow, but that Aura was unmistakable to Ash's eyes---violet and gaseous and foreboding incarnate, the unmistakable mark of a Medium. Next to Morty sat a magnificent Ninetales with billowing golden tails and red eyes glowing as it controlled the Will-O-Wisps leading Rhyperior back to its den peacefully. Banette waddled to Morty's side and scratched at his deerskin breeches, wanting to be picked up.

"In the flesh," Morty said, his voice muffled behind a purple scarf.

"Morty! What're you doin' out here, man? I mean, you've got some amazing timing!" Ash gushed.

Gengar and Mismagius rose from Ash's shoulders, drawn to Morty's Aura and curious as always. Morty's Misdreavus materialized over his head and smiled its dripping tar smile back at Ash's Ghosts, and Gengar's telltale cackling bubbled up all around them. Morty bent down to scoop up Banette and cradled the little Ghost in his arms.

"Looking for you. I figured I'd find you in the most dangerous place around, and it looks like I was right. What possessed you to pick a fight with a Rhyperior?" Morty said.

"What? Hey, I didn't pick a fight! It was an accident!" Remembering the Ranger badge he'd found, Ash fished it out of his pocket and showed it to Morty. "I found this near its den."

Morty accepted the deformed badge and examined it. "That's unfortunate. I've heard that many Indigo Rangers scouting the Silver Mountains end up lost, but what an awful way to go." He handed the badge back to Ash. "Anyway, let's go before the storm gets any worse. We have some ground to cover before we reach the safe house. Can you jump on that leg?"

Ash looked down at his injured knee. It was bleeding, but it didn't pain him as much anymore. He guessed nothing was broken. "It looks worse than it is. I've got a tourniquet in my pack, one sec." In minutes, Ash had wrapped up the wound to stop the bleeding, a temporary solution until he could get to shelter. "Hey, what'd you mean by a 'safe house'?"

"We can't stay out in the storm. This whole mountain and the valley below it is that Rhyperior's territory, so at a minimum we have to get away from here. Would you rather brave the elements? I figured you would want to sleep in a bed, but...?"

Ash gaped at him. "Like, a real bed? Hell yeah, that sounds amazing. Lead the way."

Morty recalled Ninetales and Misdreavus enveloped him with its Aura once more. He nodded to Ash and took off in an easterly

direction. Ash recalled Snorlax, promising some treatment once they were safely inside, scooped up Pikachu, and jumped after Morty.

"Hey!" Ash called. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but why're you here? Why were you looking for me?"

"Because Agatha asked me to," he said. "She said if you came out here alone, you'd probably eat something poisonous with that appetite of yours and be dead in less than a week. But I suppose she didn't think even you would be brazen enough to mess with a Rhyperior."

Agatha?

Ash couldn't help but smile at the thought of the cantankerous old crone worrying about him. Surge must have told her he was out here. The thought of Agatha drew Mismagius out of him, and it smiled along with Ash as it fondly remembered its old trainer.

"Always lookin' out for me," Ash said to himself.

Morty did not hear him, but Banette grinned, its eyes dancing with morbid mirth at some untold secret only it was privy to. And somewhere within the howling storm winds amidst the falling snow, Ash could hear the ever-present whispers that filled his head, familiar and foreign all at once, haunting him in waking as they did in his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to say thank you to everyone reading! This has gotten a lot of hits and we're only a few chapters in, so thanks so much! And thanks especially to the people commending/leaving kudos/bookmarking. I hope everyone is enjoying this story. Happy holidays to you all!

Chapter 5

Pallet Town's population had more than tripled in the last two days with the influx of injured Cinnabareans seeking shelter and medical treatment after the freak eruption of Mt. Cinnabar. Crude tents had been erected to house those that the local clinic could not accommodate, and even civilian homes graciously volunteered were overrun with the wounded and the dying. Pallet's small clinic staff was overwhelmed within hours of the first wave of arrivals at their docks, and even now with Viridian's dispatched medical professionals and Gym trainers to aid them, it seemed that there was no end to the suffering all around.

Lily sat hunched over parchment and pen scribbling away furiously, yet another letter to Indigo Plateau updating Surge about the situation here in Pallet Town as it unfolded. She tuned out the world as she wrote, diligently recording the status of key Cinnabarean people and her account of the destruction of Cinnabar Island. She was so engrossed in her work that she almost did not hear the man groaning in the bed beside her. When his hand brushed her knee, she jumped out of her chair and surprised Pikachu, who let out an electric shock that fried the letter she'd been writing. Lily's hair stood on end as adrenaline and static electricity coursed through her small body and she breathed through her teeth.

"Oh... Blaine!" she said, kneeling over the man in the four-poster bed.

Blaine, what was left of him, seemed to shrink in on himself, as though his body had exhausted its last effort in getting her attention and now wanted to shut down. He was covered in burns that were in turn covered in bloody bandages. His legs and healthy right arm had fallen into lava, and half his face and bald head had suffered burns so severe that his skull and cheek bone were visible beneath the blackened bloody skin. A nurse had done her best to swath him in linen dressings, but they were soaking through with blood and smelled foul with the stench of decay and smoke.

And yet, Blaine was alive. Somehow, some way, Marla had found him in the ruins of an erupting Mt. Cinnabar being carried by Magmortar, who was all but immune to the spewing magma's fiery touch. Blaine had survived a burning that would have instantly killed anyone else without his Ignifer blood. But for how much longer, Lily could not be certain.

After all, Blaine was and always had been merely human.

"M... Misssss," he wheezed through his tightly wrapped bandages wet anew with blood as he moved his jaw.

"Blaine, oh my god," Lily said, her heart racing as she took his diseased left hand in hers. "Don't speak, okay? You were really badly burned and you're bleeding. Oh..." She paled. "I have to call the nurse. Just hold tight, okay?"

She tried to leave, but Blaine tightened his grip on her hands. "Miss K-Kida," he managed.

Lily could not bear to look upon him like this. He was so frail and small, a withered shell of his former stature wrapped up like a fly in spider's silk awaiting death's jaws. Corpse-like, he lay there still as stone save for the grip on her hand. His flinty eye was glazed with fever and delirium, like he was seeing someone else when he looked at her face. Tears stung Lily's amber eyes. She had not cried once since coming here, since finding out Blaine was alive and rushing him and the other survivors to Pallet Town for emergency treatment. But now, alone with him in his private sick bed in Delia Ketchum's own house surrounded by thick walls and the low thudding of the medical staff's feet thumping about downstairs tending to other patients, she could not bear it.

"I'm here," she said, sniffling. "You're not alone, Blaine."

She could not be sure that he heard her, and as he lapsed into silence save for his rattling breathing, she resolved to go find Marla. She would want to be here with her ailing grandfather, Lily imagined. Marla had taken over the command of Cinnabar's stranded citizens and military in her grandfather's incapacitation, and she was somewhere in Pallet Town now overseeing the continuing influx of more survivors and coordinating with Viridian's Gym trainers and aid workers. Marla was busy helping people, but she had to be here, she had to be, because if not, if she wasn't here for Blaine now, then it might be too late.

"I'll just be right back with Marla, okay?" Lily said, holding out a hand for Pikachu to climb up her arm. She could worry about the letter to Surge later.

But Blaine did not let go. Madness and pain colored his normally piercing flinty stare. "I'm not... I didn't---" he began.

"It's okay, you just have to rest until you're better, okay?" Lily said, fighting to keep her voice steady. God, she could not stand the sight of him like this, so small and broken and *human*. "Um, Delia?" she shouted to be heard downstairs. "Could you tell General Marla that Blaine's awake?"

"What was that?" Delia's voice came from downstairs.

Blaine squeezed harder. "Miss Kida," he tried again.

"It's Blaine!" Lily said more loudly. "He's awake!"

"Miss Kida," Blaine said, his voice raw like he'd been screaming. "I'm... I'm sorry."

Lily stared down at him, not understanding. "Um, sorry, what? I mean, the sorry you just said..."

Blaine's face was clammy with sweat and etiolated as though he'd been drained of blood and vigor. "Maybe I des...deserve this," he rasped.

"Sir, you're not making any sense," Lily tried. She put a reassuring hand on his head. "You've been through a lot."

He shied from her touch, but he didn't get far. "No, I... Mewtwo, I c-couldn't save..."

There was a long silence as Lily digested his words. "Oh my god," she said at length. "The cure, it... *You* gave Mewtwo the cure?"

"He did what?" Marla demanded.

She stood in the open doorway in full regalia, her red ringlets fallen astray from her normally severe bun and disheveled in the aftermath of the worst crisis she'd ever lived through and the first she'd ever had to manage alone. There were dark shadows beneath her grey eyes that made her look older than her years, and a gauntness in her pleasantly round face that lended an air of the moribund.

"General Marla," Lily said, her voice catching in her throat.

Marla crossed the room in three steps and hovered over Blaine's other side at the edge of the bed. The blue duvet was stained where his bandages had leaked through. She could not find her words as she stared down at Blaine and laid a shaking hand on his shoulder. He shuddered at her touch, as though wounded, and Marla blinked rapidly to fend off an onslaught of incoming tears.

"I was wrong," Blaine said softly. "I was s-so wrong."

"What?" Marla said. "Grandfather, it's me. You're not making any sense."

Blaine's every breath was like an old door creaking on its hinges under the force of a chilly night's wind. "M-Marla, is that you?"

Marla nodded as she bravely fought off her tears. "Yes, it's me, Grandfather. I'm right here."

"Then..." Blaine trailed off as a wave of fresh pain racked his body. "I... I can rest easy...with you here."

Marla's hands shook as she finally succumbed to her tears. "Don't say that," she implored him. "Don't you dare say that."

Lily wanted to give them their privacy, but Blaine still had her hand in an iron grip. His only visible eye swiveled to see her through his feverish gaze. "You...must stop it."

Lily shook her head. "Blaine, I---"

"I couldn't... You must stop Mewtwo."

"Don't worry about that now," Marla said, sniffling loudly. "Just get your rest, and---"

"I was...wrong," Blaine said.

Lily shook her head. "No, you weren't. Mewtwo ended up killing so many people. You cured it, and it turned on us, just like you said it would. Blaine, I'm so sorry."

He shivered as he tried to shake his head. Blood stained the sky blue pillow under his head as he rubbed his bandages against it. "No, it's... I tried to...to see it your way. Mewtwo is...not the monster. But I---"

His wet breathing gave way to a coughing fit, and he shrank in on himself as the spasm crushed his lungs and exacerbated his wounds. Marla was beside herself with grief as she tried to calm him, and in the commotion Blaine let go of Lily's hand.

"Mewtwo's not the monster here. You are."

Lily quaked at the memory of those cold and callous words, the last words she'd spoken to Blaine before the terrible eruption.

"Oh, Blaine," she said, her tears falling freely now. "I didn't..."

I did mean it, she thought traitorously. *I meant every word.*

How could she say such a thing to him? How could she when he'd done so much good in his life? One mistake, no matter how awful, could not possibly erase all the good he'd done to create and protect Cinnabar, to protect Kanto, to rise as a symbol of heroism and strength, could it?

"M-Miss Kida," Blaine said. "You must...find Mewtwo before it...it's too late."

"Grandfather, stop," Marla said. "You need your strength. The doctors here can help you, so just please---"

"Mewtwo," Blaine went on. "It's... Mewtwo is alone. You *must*..."

Lily choked on a sob.

"You disgust me."

Her voice echoed in her head, the memories of her last spiteful words to Blaine, but it abandoned her now.

"I'm so... I'm sor..." Blaine trailed off. His visible eye rolled back in his head and fell closed as he shuddered with a fresh wave of pain.

Lily could only stare in shock as Marla shook Blaine and tried to rouse him, but he slipped into unconsciousness as the pain overtook him. Delia Ketchum's voice cut through Lily's muddled thoughts and Marla's pleas, and suddenly there was someone else in the room, an old woman doctor dispatched from Viridian, and she was pushing Lily away to get at Blaine and inject him full of Hyper Potion and Burn Heal and anything else she could think of to save his life. But as she watched from the sidelines, Lily knew it was too late. Blaine had closed his eyes, those eyes that could cut down even the toughest of opponents and see through lies and sincerity alike, and they would never open again. Pikachu squeaked pitifully at her shoulder, smelling death in the room, and Lily had to get out. She could not bear this, the

sight of someone so mighty, so much *more* than she ever had been and ever would be succumbing to something as whimsical and *human* as death. She could not abide it, and so she ran out of the room, down the stairs, and outside over Delia's concerned protestations, leaving Marla to grieve over her family in his last moments.

But it was worse outside. The sick tents were set up everywhere she looked, like mushrooms sprouted after a hard rain. Everywhere she turned, Lily found death's putrid shadow lingering. Men and women and children and Pokemon alike suffered in various states of life and death, burned and maimed and melted beyond recognition. Pikachu squeaked and fisted its tiny paws in her ponytail, and she ran. She ran until she ran into something and nearly fell over.

"Lily, hey," came a familiar voice.

A hand caught her arm as she tripped, and Lily found herself looking up into disappointed green eyes she knew all too well. The tear tracks streaking her face were hot as they were joined by fresh ones, and she shook.

"G-Gary," she wept.

Gary Oak did not need to be Clairvoyant to sense her pain, and in an uncharacteristic show of empathy, he pulled her close and embraced her, supporting her weight and Pikachu's so she would not have to. Lily broke down and sobbed into his shoulder, soiling his purple shirt but unable to stop herself. Never had she felt so small in all her life as she did now.

"Everything's not fine," he whispered softly, pragmatically, like he always did. "But you're not alone here."

He waited for her to calm down a bit, and when she pulled back he continued to lend her his support. Espeon stood at his heels, ever alert and staring off into space like it could see something no one else could. Alakazam was just behind him, spoons in hand and glowing blue with Confusion as it diligently transported boxes to a nearby tent with the power of telekinesis. Aerodactyl, saddled and for once docile, sat hunched over with its enormous wings folded as it patiently allowed Alakazam to unload its burden---more medical supplies for the wounded straight from Viridian.

"Gary," Lily said. "I'm sorry, I think I got snot on your shirt."

He sighed. "It's okay. I don't even like this shirt."

"Liar," she said, sniffling.

He spared her a smile he didn't feel and helped her regain her balance. "I'm happy to see you, but this wasn't exactly what I envisioned when I got Delia's invitation to visit."

Lily shook her head. "I-I'm so sorry," she stammered. Remembering herself, she met his gaze. "Gary, it's Blaine. He... He's..."

Gary abandoned his half-hearted attempt to lighten the mood and

adopted a sobering glare. "What is it? Was he caught up in the eruption, too?"

"He's..." Lily could not bring herself to say it. Just a simple word, and yet she could not make it come out.

Dead. He's dead.

"I... Blaine's..."

Gary searched her bloodshot eyes for a moment, but he didn't need to say anything. He slowly released her. "I see," he said.

"Gary," Lily said. "It's about Mewtwo. It... The eruption, it..."

Gary quickly put the pieces together. "Damnit. So this was Mewtwo's doing. But I thought Mewtwo was sick? Last time, it couldn't even get out of its tank."

Lily nodded and wiped her face with a sleeve. "It was Blaine. He, um, he used the antidote on Mewtwo. I-I don't know why, he was so against it."

Gary pursed his lips together. "Apparently he wasn't as against it as you thought, or he wouldn't have done it."

"Mewtwo is...not the monster."

Blaine's confession echoed in her mind like the fragments of a recurring nightmare. All around them, people ran around helping the wounded, ferrying supplies, following orders. All of Pallet seemed to have mobilized to help its southern island neighbor, and Lily even saw a few uniformed Pewter Gym trainers among those helping.

"You did all this?" she asked.

"No, you did," Gary said. "Surge got your first SOS, and he sent birds to Viridian and Pewter to send help. If it wasn't for that, we may have gotten here too late to save a lot of the wounded."

Lily hugged herself, and Pikachu squeaked in her ear. "I don't know what to do." She searched his eyes. "I'm one of the Elite Four, but I don't know what to do."

"Lily," he began.

"Cinnabar's *gone*," she interrupted. "Mewtwo's gone, too."

"Sir, we need you," an older man in Viridian Gym-issue armor said. A squat Drowzee lumbered at his side, its vacant eyes fixated on Gary as though mesmerized.

"Right, I'm coming. Make sure the supplies get to that tent over there," Gary said. "And get me General---er, Gym Leader Marla. We have to discuss relocation of the wounded to Viridian as soon as possible."

Gym Leader Marla.

Lily felt numb hearing it out loud. Gary was so calm and collected, everything she could never be. He'd lost his beloved grandfather not so long ago, and in the face of this new crisis, he was as cool as ever taking control of the situation. Would she be a better Elite if she was

more like Gary? If she was more like Blaine? Could she have averted this crisis if she'd just deferred to Blaine respectfully on his decision not to give Mewtwo the cure? Had she caused this by insulting him the way she did? Was this... Was it her fault Blaine was dead and Mewtwo had escaped?

"Are you listening?" Gary said, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"What?" Lily said.

"I was asking you about Mewtwo, what happened to it. But I think maybe you should get checked out by one of the nurses here."

Lily went red in the face. "I-I'm not hurt, sorry, I just didn't hear you."

He did not look convinced. "I know you were close with Blaine. It's okay if you need some time."

Lily shook her head, not really hearing him.

"Ivy's with Gym Leader Janine in Fuchsia this week, but Brock's here and between the two of us, we can handle things here. I got word that Surge's sending a team of Rangers to help. They should be here soon---"

"No," Lily said suddenly. "I can't just sit by. This is my fault."

Gary got that quietly frustrated look he often got with Ivy or Ash whenever they defied his suggestions or came up with some new crazy plan. He squeezed Lily's shoulder gently. "This is not your fault. This is Mewtwo's fault."

"But I'm the reason Mewtwo escaped!" Lily insisted. "If it wasn't for the antidote, then it never---"

"You said Blaine gave Mewtwo the cure."

"The cure *I* created!"

Pikachu huddled into the crook of Lily's neck, startled by her raised voice. Espeon looked up at Lily with its ever unblinking stare, perhaps a silent warning of some kind.

Gary took a calming breath. "...Lily, don't---"

"I'm going after it," she said with a confidence that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. She was still shaking, and tears still stained her cheeks, but her blood was pumping vigorously and she itched to break something. "I'm going after Mewtwo."

Gary did not look even the least bit surprised. "I know what you're thinking," he said, "and it's my job to tell you that's the worst idea you've ever had. You know what Mewtwo's capable of."

"So do you," Lily shot back. "You know better than anybody, so you know it can't be out there like this. Not when it could hurt so many people and Pokemon."

"If you go after Mewtwo, it could hurt *you*, Lily," Gary said, exasperated. "No way. Ash would kill me if he knew I let you run after it alone."

"Yeah, well, Ash isn't here!"

Some Viridian Gym trainers passing them stopped to gawk at the puny blonde girl shouting at their Gym Leader, but one chilling look from Alakazam and they were on their way in a hurry.

Gary pinched the bridge of his nose. "Listen to yourself for a minute. You're talking about pursuing Mewtwo after it decimated all of Cinnabar Island. I'm not letting you go on a wild goose chase to your death precisely *because* I know what Mewtwo's capable of."

"You're a Gym Leader, but you forget that I'm one of the Elite Four now," Lily found herself saying. "You can't tell me what I can and can't do... But I can order you to stay in Viridian and do your duty."

Gary actually looked incredulous for a moment. "Lily, you can't be serious. You're not going alone."

"It's not your decision. You're responsible for Viridian. I'm responsible for all of Kanto and Johto."

Gary was about to respond to that when Marla interrupted them.

"You," she said, approaching. "Thank you for all your assistance, but there's no time for pleasantries. I have a team of Charizard ready to airlift a dozen wounded to Viridian."

"Gym Leader Marla," Gary said, his voice strained. "Yes, that's fine. I have the Viridian General Hospital emergency team waiting on standby."

Marla's flinty eyes flashed at the title Gary afforded to her, but she nodded stiffly. "Good." She indicated Aerodactyl behind Gary. The huge reptile was stretching its wings now that its burden had been unloaded. "If you can spare that Aerodactyl, we could carry twice as many wounded in one trip."

"Of course," Gary said.

"I'm going after Mewtwo," Lily blurted out.

Marla looked at her like she was too exhausted to argue. "Why?"

"Because I can't let what happened to Cinnabar happen anywhere else."

"Lily," Gary warned.

Marla was silent for a few moments. "Blaine created Mewtwo, but it was you who saved it. I suppose in a way, that makes you Mewtwo's creator, too. Who am I to get in the way of a monster and its maker?"

She turned to leave.

"Marla," Gary called to her. "I'm...sorry for your loss."

Marla stiffened, but she said nothing and headed off to coordinate with her people and get the Charizard airlift moving.

"I'm going, Gary. Blaine would've wanted me to," Lily said. "And she's right. Mewtwo's my responsibility now."

"No, it's not," Gary said. "You didn't do this. But..." He ran a hand through his hair, a nervous tick. "I know you're gonna do what you

want no matter what I say. You're a good person."

Pikachu squeaked shyly, and Lily drew some strength from the Electric rodent. "I want to help Mewtwo," she said.

"How do you plan on doing that? I remember being in Mewtwo's head. It hates humans, all of us. Not that I blame it."

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I'll think of something. I'm smart, you said so yourself."

He averted his gaze, and she knew she had him. "I would vigorously debate whether this is smart or not."

"You can debate it when I get back. But I have to go now."

"Now? Do you even know where Mewtwo went?"

"I know it went north towards Johto, so that's where I'll go until there's nowhere left to go."

Gary thought about this. "Northern Johto... That antidote may have cured it, but its body was in bad shape from what I remember. It'll need to recover away from people to avoid detection."

"What're you thinking?"

He looked like he didn't want to tell her. Pikachu squeaked, unnerved by Gary's sudden reticence.

"Gary?" Lily said.

"The only place in northern Johto I can think that it would go is the Kyukai Valley."

Lily bit her lip. The Kyukai Valley was a vast expanse far to the north of Mahogany Town. Ensconced between the Silver Mountains to the east and rolling hills to the west, the Kyukai Valley was sheltered from the harsh conditions of the Silver Mountains and home to many feral Pokemon. A hundred lakes dappled the landscape, still and clear and deep and shallow, and layered waterfalls fed rivers and streams that connected them all. The Lake of Rage north of Mahogany was the southernmost of the many lakes. It had been home to a fearsome red Gyarados before Marco caught it. More dangerous Pokemon lived farther north deeper in the sprawling valley forests, where few people dared to trespass. If Mewtwo needed somewhere to recover away from prying eyes that was nearly impossible to follow, the Kyukai Valley could be the perfect hiding place.

"Then that's where I'll go. I better leave now since I'll have to take a boat to Johto," Lily said.

"Lily, seriously, you can't go alone. Take some Rangers with you, at least. Let me send for Ivy, or even Ethan."

She shook her head. "That'll take too long. And they have other jobs that're just as important. I can't hog them all to myself."

Gary was on his last leg. "If anything were to happen to you..."

She smiled brightly for him. "Hey, I'm friends with Dragons. I don't scare easy."

"Ivy's going to skin me alive when she finds out I let this happen."

"Tell her if she does, I'll demote her to Junior Ranger. Under Ethan."

Gary did not take her joke well, and Lily's smile faltered.

"I'll be okay. Things're different now. I'm not like I was back on Shamouti Island," she said.

"Please, you're exactly the same. You'll never change."

Lily wasn't sure if that was meant to be a compliment or not.

"Just... Just be careful. Please," he said softly.

"I promise."

That conversation with Gary had happened a week ago. Since then, Lily had crossed the sea at Pallet Town into Johto, skirted Cherrygrove City by way of Route Thirty, and followed Route Forty-Three north to the Lake of Rage. Dodrio had carried her a long way on its powerful legs, and now she had finally arrived at the southern edge of Johto's Kyukai Valley. There were nine villages located along the outskirts of the valley, seven of which remained populated by the native people that called this valley their home. They were an old tribe that lived their lives peacefully removed from the rest of Johto and preferred to keep things that way. They had no Gym Leaders, and they were not subject to the sovereignty or laws of the Pokemon League. This was their land, their home, and Lily was an uninvited guest.

Gary had advised her to go to the village closes to the Lake of Rage, but like the other nine villages, it had no official name in the common tongue. The Johtoans called it One Village, the first of nine named after numbers for convenience, but the locals simply called it Domus---Home.

It was just past lunchtime when Lily and Dodrio arrived in Domus. Nestled along a cluster of lush green hills, Domus was a village of roughly 1,000 inhabitants. The houses were built of wood and stone and painted in bright oranges and reds and purples and greens. A tiered waterfall fed a stream that cut through the village center and flowed south to the Lake of Rage. To the east rose the foothills of the Silver Mountains, and far beyond those lay the snowy peaks of the mountains themselves. Ash was there, somewhere. At the northern edge of the village stood an enormous pine tree fifteen stories tall. It was bedecked with colorful prayer flags that fluttered in the wind, as if to ward off anything that might descend on the village from the northern wilds. Mewtwo was out there somewhere beyond the barrier, roaming the untamed valley. Lily was sure of it. All she had to do was find it.

Dodrio was tired from the long journey, so Lily recalled the three-headed dodo bird with the promise of food later and slowly made her

way up the stone steps towards the village center. It was cool this far north in autumn, much cooler than Cinnabar or even Pallet, and Lily's first order of business was to find a place where she could purchase clothing more appropriate for the environment. Pikachu rode on her shoulder, as usual, and sniffed the crisp northern air hungrily.

"You like it here, ChuChu?" she asked.

Pikachu sparked, and Lily reached up to scratch it behind the ear.

"Me, too," she said. "It's peaceful, huh?"

Locals peeked out at her from windows and behind doors. They were clad in handmade clothes sewn from furs and leathers and dyed wool. Some walked down the street carrying baskets full of berries and herbs, and one old man wheeled a rickety wooden cart with the help of a greying Tauros. The cart was loaded with small Pokemon carcasses, from Buizel to Sentret and even a few Bunnelby. Lily waved him down.

"Oh! Excuse me, sir, how much for three of those?" She indicated three Buizel carcasses and wondered if Dodrio would like the taste of otter.

The old man stopped his Tauros and gesticulated with his leathery brown hands. He said something unintelligible, but Lily caught a couple recognizable words. It took her a moment to understand.

"Oh boy," she said. "You speak the old tongue here, don't you?"

Shoot. I don't know the old tongue at all...

"Um..." Lily walked around the cart and pointed out three Buizel carcasses. "I'd like, uh, these three." She held up three fingers and pointed again at the dead otters. Then she dug out a few coins from her pocket and showed them to the man. "How much?"

The old man smiled, revealing only three teeth remaining in his gums, and nodded emphatically. "Good eat," he said in a heavy accent that made it sound like he had a mouth full of pebbles.

"Yeah, good eating, just not for me," Lily said. "It's for my bird, Dody."

The man looked at her strangely.

"Oh my goodness, of course you don't know who Dody is." Lily laughed at her own folly and released Dodrio once more. The three-headed bird squawked shrilly, startling both the old man and his Tauros. "One, two, three," Lily said, pointing at each head as she counted. "So, I'll take three Buizel, okay?"

The man accepted her coins with shaky hands, and Lily grabbed three Buizel carcasses to feed to Dodrio's heads. The huge bird gulped them down whole right there in the middle of the road, and the man and his Tauros hurried down the street with the rest of the haul without so much as a look back. Lily patted Dodrio's feathered flank and whispered to it. The three heads, normally belligerent and in

constant competition with each other, were soothed momentarily now that they'd eaten and allowed Lily to pet each of them without a fuss.

"Okay, good bird, Dody. You should rest now while I find some better clothes and stuff," Lily said.

Pikachu squeaked and hopped up on top of her head once Dodrio was back in its Pokeball, and Lily continued deeper into the village. The center had a very small shopping district where a few people were out running errands. She found a store that sold various outdoor gear, second-hand products procured from the southern cities as well as handmade local gear, and wandered inside. It did not take long for her to pick out a set of animal skin clothes that would serve her well in the outdoors---doeskin breeches, fur-lined boots, leather vest, thick woolen sweater. When she attempted to purchase the clothes, she encountered the same problem with the man who owned the store. He did not seem to speak even a word of the common tongue.

"Um, I just want to buy these," Lily said, setting the bundle of clothes down on the counter. She retrieved her coin purse and set it down next to them. "I can pay, see?"

The man, short and dark of skin and speaking in the gravelly lilt of the old tongue, began poking and prodding at the clothes she had selected as he spoke rapidly.

"I'm sorry, I really don't understand," Lily said sheepishly. "Aren't these for sale?"

Pikachu hopped down on the counter, interested in the man, but he jerked away at Pikachu's sudden proximity and rattled on unintelligibly, sounding more agitated than he had before.

"Oh, ChuChu's harmless, don't worry," Lily said, reaching for Pikachu.

Another voice said something Lily did not understand, a girl's voice this time, and a young girl appeared from somewhere in the back through a dividing curtain. She was young, fourteen or fifteen at the most with the same copper-toned skin, dark almond eyes, and full lips ubiquitous among the native people Lily had encountered already. She spoke rapidly to the man and touched his wrist in a reassuring manner, perhaps trying to calm him.

"I am sorry," she said to Lily. "My father does not trust outsiders."

Lily gaped at the girl. "Y-You speak the common tongue?!"

The girl smiled shyly. "A little."

Her accent was less harsh than that of the old man who had sold Lily the Buizel carcasses, but the same grinding undertones colored this girl's speech.

"Wow, I thought I'd have to pantomime my way through this town, and I'm *really* bad at charades," Lily said.

"You want to buy this?" the girl asked. "It will be ten for

everything."

Lily frowned. "Ten? That's it?" She opened up the coin purse and drew a few coins. "I was gonna pay twenty."

"Twenty is too much."

"But this stuff is so nice. It's worth way more than ten."

The girl's father said something harsh, though Lily did not have to understand his words to see his discomfort.

"Twenty is too much," the girl said again. "It is an insult to offer more than what something is worth."

Lily blanched and covered her mouth. "Goodness, I'm *so sorry*. I had no idea! I... Please, sir, I didn't mean to offend you," she pleaded with the girl's father.

A few more words were exchanged, and the man took one of the pieces of ten from Lily and snapped something at his daughter.

"He says he does not like to be threatened with Pokemon violence. You should take your Pikachu outside," the girl said.

Lily was at a loss for words, and it was all she could do to scoop up Pikachu in her arms protectively. "I... I wasn't---"

The girl's father said something in a clipped tone and disappeared through the curtain that led to the back of the store.

"I'll just, um, I'll take these and go then," Lily mumbled.

The girl watched her go. "You should keep your Pokemon out of sight indoors. It is poor manners to release strange Pokemon around people in their homes or places of business."

"Look, I'm really sorry, I honestly didn't know. But ChuChu wouldn't hurt anybody, I swear. I just wanted to buy some clothes so I wouldn't get cold up here," Lily said.

"Do you plan to stay long?"

Lily considered herself a reasonable person on most days, and she did her best to see the good in everyone even if they sometimes did not offer the same courtesy in return. But this girl, her father, this whole place seemed so unaccommodating for no good reason. She meant no harm, couldn't they see that?

"That depends," Lily said.

"On what?"

"On whether I find what I came here looking for. What's your name, anyway?"

The girl blinked guilelessly. "You shall call me Anna."

Lily frowned. "You...don't look like an 'Anna'."

The girl smiled. "You could not pronounce my true name. Most outsiders do not speak our language."

"You mean, the old tongue."

"What is old to you is simply the way things are to me."

Could this girl really be only fifteen? Lily was finding it hard to

keep her footing around her. Pikachu squirmed in her arms and crawled onto her shoulder.

"Okay, *Anna*," Lily said, trying to keep her voice light and amiable. "Maybe you can help me. I'm here on, um, official business from the Pokemon League. I'm one of the Elite Four."

Anna did not flinch. "You fight with Pokemon for sport."

"...No, I'm a scientist."

"A scientist who fights."

"When I have to, but never for sport."

"Then for what?"

"For the truth," Lily said readily. "And to help people."

"My people do not answer to you and your League," Anna said.

"No, but you depend on goods and services you get in places like Mahogany and Ecruteak to help you survive." Lily pointed out an expensive looking knapsack with the logo of a well-known mountaineering company embroidered on the flap. "Or did you make that by hand, too?"

Anna said nothing, and Lily shook her head.

"Look, I'm not here to cause any trouble or interfere with you and your people. I'm just here looking for something. I don't, I mean, I'm not really good with the whole hidden agenda thing 'cause I don't have one. I'm a scientist, not a fighter. I honestly just want to help."

Anna studied her for a moment. "Outsiders are not supposed to venture into the Hundred Mirror Valley. You have your souvenirs, now you can leave."

"The... Oh, you mean the Kyukai Valley."

"That is your name for it, not mine."

Lily put up her hands in a placating gesture. "Of course, right, my mistake. But I can't leave. I have to find Mewtwo."

Anna frowned, and Lily fished out a photograph from her pocket.

"Maybe you can help me, Anna. The Pokemon I'm looking for may have come this way, you know? Do you recognize it?"

Lily showed Anna the picture, a grainy shot of Mewtwo suspended in its rejuvenation tank, but Anna only stared at it blankly. Lily bit her lip.

"Oh, duh, of course you probably didn't see it up close," Lily said, trying to smile. She fished out another picture, this one of a comet visible to the naked eye, its white trail stark and bright against the blue sky. "It probably looked a little like this, but it wasn't a comet, it was a Pokemon. Mewtwo escaped thirteen days ago, and I saw it flying off towards this place. Did you see anything weird that day? Something like this comet, maybe?"

Anna was very still as she set her jaw. She whispered something, but Lily could only catch one word that she did not understand.

"*Mors*?" Lily said. "What's that?"

Anna's dark eyes were wide with fear that had not been there before. "You must go. Do not come back."

All of a sudden, Lily found herself being all but pushed out of the little store with the door slammed behind her. She pocketed the pictures and hoisted her purchased clothing under her arm. Pikachu squeaked down at her from its perch on her head.

"Well, that could've gone a little better," Lily said glumly.

But she could not just leave. She had the gear she needed now, so all she had to do was find someone who would be willing to point her in the right direction. Maybe some of the other natives would be more forthcoming.

Just stay positive, girl. Someone will help me.

Lily made her way deeper into Domus, passing by buildings painted in bright colors. Some depicted murals of Pokemon native to the valley, including Bouffalant and Gogoat and Ursaring, among others. Lily marveled at the detail, the reverence that clearly went into the renditions. She felt bad about the confrontation with Anna earlier, wishing she'd been more sensitive to the cultural divide between them. If she'd had the time, she would have read up on the local culture and customs here, but she did not have time. Mewtwo was out there somewhere, and it was a danger to everyone, including these innocent people.

She found a place that smelled like it was serving food, and her stomach grumbled. Pikachu squeaked happily at the thought of food.

"Oh, ChuChu, you can't be seen, remember?" Lily said, plucking the little rodent from her head. "I don't wanna get in trouble with any more locals, okay? So in you go."

Pikachu whined when it saw the little Pokeball marked with a lightning bolt. Like many of its kind, Pikachu hated to be confined to a Pokeball and was very vocal about its preference. Lily sighed.

"This stinks. You don't mean any harm, but... Okay, how about this? You can ride in my bag, but you have to stay hidden, okay? I promise I'll feed you after."

It took some coaxing, but Lily got Pikachu to crawl into her backpack. Its ears were visible through the open flap, but as long as it stayed snuggled inside, no one should notice it there.

"You be good, ChuChu, okay? I'm counting on you."

Pikachu squeaked, and Lily went inside the restaurant. Immediately, her mouth began to water as the smell of stew filled her nostrils and warmed her down to her toes. A fire roared in the enormous stone hearth, over which an old woman was stirring a huge pot of stew and a younger woman, perhaps her daughter, was filling bread bowls to serve to the patrons. There were not many of them,

and they were seated at long communal tables eating and drinking from heavy bone mugs. The old tongue was coarse and choppy, like a wild river, and Lily could not understand a word of it. For the first time, she was sort of regretting refusing to let Gary accompany her. He'd studied the language for some years, which was more than Lily had ever done.

But Gary wasn't here. It was just her, and this was her mess to clean up. Marla had an entire island of refugees to assuage and look after, as well as a Gym Leader mantle to uphold now that Blaine had passed. She had enough on her plate, and Lily owed it to her and the people of Cinnabar to fix this before another tragedy could befall some other town. She just hoped she wouldn't be too late.

The first thing Lily did was head to the bathroom, which was little more than a hole in the ground and a threadbare curtain she could pull back for some privacy. Pikachu complained about the smell even with the stick of incense burning in a cup on a small shelf over the privy, but Lily shushed it and hastily changed into her purchased skins and leathers. They fit well enough, and they were quite warm and solid. The crossbow she'd brought was strapped to her waist along with a small quiver full of spare bolts, and a hunting knife Ivy had given her was tucked into a holster over her ankle. She shouldered her pack once again, patted the flap to remind Pikachu to stay out of sight, and found a seat at one of the long tables.

The feeling of eyes on her back was like Bugs crawling along her bare skin. She stuck out like a sore thumb here with her bubblegum blonde hair and fair complexion, and she had a sinking feeling that the other patrons were all talking about her, wondering why she was here, dressed like them, alone. The woman filling bowls approached her like one might a caged animal, but Lily put on her brightest smile and held out a coin.

The woman eyed her warily and rattled something off in the old tongue.

"Um," Lily hesitated. She looked around and pointed to the men sitting closest to her a few seats down. "I'll have that."

The woman followed her pointing and nodded at length. "*Cinci*," she said.

"I..." Lily held out a few coins.

The woman selected a five-piece coin, pursed her lips, and stalked off to get Lily's order. Lily had just enough time to pocket the rest of her money and set down her pack before the woman returned with a bread bowl filled to the brim with stew and a bone-carved mug filled with a suspicious-looking milky liquid.

"Oh, thank you!" Lily called after her.

The three men downwind of her were casting glances her way, so

Lily smiled and waved at them. They did not return the gesture.

"Well, at least I'll have a full stomach," she said to herself.

Pikachu squeaked and poked its head out, drawn to the smell of food, and Lily nearly had a heart attack for fear that it would be spotted. She patted the flap of her pack down.

"Later, ChuChu, I promise. Please stay in there for now, okay?"

The food smelled sinfully good after the long trip here, and Lily heartily dug in. The stew was thick with onions and carrots and barley, and the meat was tender and savory but wholly unfamiliar to her. The drink was heavily perfumed with the smell of cinnamon and cloves, but when she took one sip of it, she had to force herself not spit it out all over the table. It was some kind of fermented milk, thick with curdle and sour underneath the mask of sweet and spicy. Her throat burned as it went down, and her tongue felt heavy in her mouth, like it was too big to fit.

"Maybe I'll pass on the grog," she said sickly.

The men sitting nearest to her saw her react violently to the drink and had a raucous laugh at her expense. She forced a weak smile and raised the mug towards them. In return, the biggest of them all who looked like he could have eaten the others whole downed his entire mug. Curdled milk stuck to his wiry black beard and mustache, and he licked at it with his tongue. Lily set down her mug and had a thought that made her feel sick to her stomach.

"Sometimes I hate having good ideas," she grumbled to herself.

She finished her stew and tried to commit the taste to memory before shouldering her bag and approaching the men, her mug in hand.

"Hello," she said, smiling in that sweetly disarming way she had. "Mind if I sit?"

There were three of them, working men by the looks of them. Their faces and clothes were smeared with dirt and grime from a hard day's labor tilling the fields surrounding the village, and despite the big man's ample facial hair, Lily guessed that they could not be much older than she was. The two smaller men stared at her blankly and exchanged a few words she did not understand, and the big hairy one guffawed.

"*Rubia*, you like?" the big man said.

Lily gaped at him. "I... You speak the common tongue? Wait, what's a *rubia*?"

He grinned and pointed at her face. Lily touched her cheek, confused, and the man sitting next to her tugged lightly on her ponytail.

"*Ru-bi-a*," he said slowly.

"My hair? Oh, I get it. I look different because of my hair, is that

it?" Lily said.

The big man laughed and scooped a spoonful of his stew to show her. "Like?" he asked again.

"Yes, it was delicious," Lily said.

"*Ursus*," the big man said. "You like?"

"Ursus?" Lily thought about that. "Wait, you mean like Ursaring?"

The two smaller men laughed, and the big man ate the spoonful of stew.

"Huh, I've never had bear before. It was good," Lily said. She raised her mug. "And this? What is this?"

They spoke again rapidly in the old tongue, perhaps amused at this little blonde girl's attempts to engage them in conversation. Again, the big man spoke for the others.

"*Ursus*," he said again. "You like drink?"

He rolled the r in drink so heavily that Lily almost thought he was doing it on purpose.

"Ursus again, so you mean..."

Lily tried to hide her queasiness with a smile. Fermented curdled Ursaring milk was not something she'd ever thought she would try.

I guess there's a first time for everything.

"*Eu*!" the big man said.

"*Eu*! *Eu*!" the other two echoed his toast.

The rest of the scattered patrons took up the toast, and everyone lifted their mugs. Lily had no choice but to join in their toast or appear rude, so she raised her mug with the others, closed her eyes, and tried to think of chocolate chip cookies and flowers and Ash, anything pleasant to get her mind off what she was about to do. Everyone drank to the toast with gusto, and Lily held her breath as she gulped down the fermented milk. It was a testament to her fortitude that she did not throw up, but she did choke on her third gulp and began to cough. The big man was laughing, and someone was patting her on the back to soothe the spasm. Her fingers were shaking as they gripped the handle on the bone mug, and she shuddered. But she lifted her head and smiled, and the men laughed all over again. This time, she thought it didn't sound quite so mocking.

"Cheers," she said weakly. Her throat burned and she was sure she'd swallowed chunks of curdled milk, but her stomach was pleasantly warm, and the warmth was spreading. The cocktail of spices mixed with the milk coated her tongue and eased the acrid taste of the drink enough to be bearable.

"*Rubia*," the big man said. "You visit? Eh, vacation?"

"Vacation? Oh, me? No, not really. I'm, um, well, I'm looking for something," Lily said. "Actually, I was wondering if you'd seen it."

"Lose friend?" the big man asked. "Valley is, eh, much danger.

Ursus and *Rex*, much danger."

"Right, I know there's lots of wild Pokemon in the valley, but I have to find what I lost. Um, just a minute..." Lily fished the pictures of the comet and of Mewtwo she'd brought along with her and showed them to the three men. "You see, I'm not looking for a friend, I'm looking for this." She pointed at Mewtwo. "It would've looked like this," she said, pointing next to the picture of the comet, "and it would've passed over here about thirteen days ago. Did you see anything like this?"

The men began to mutter amongst themselves, and the big man snapped something at the other two. They got up, suddenly angry, and Lily got up with them.

"Hey, wait a minute, please, I just need to know where it went," she tried.

The men ignored her.

"Wait! Does *Mors* mean anything to you?"

They all shut up suddenly and stared at her as though she'd just cursed their families.

"I... I mean, Anna said something about *Mors*, and I---"

"Anna," the big man said. "Anna lies. I see nothing, no *Mors*, no."

Lily scrambled to block the big man's escape and shoved the pictures in his face. "Please, I'm begging you. It's imperative that I find this. It's dangerous, okay? Like *Ursus*."

The big man's fearful eyes flashed with anger. "No *Ursus*. *Mors* is no *Ursus*."

"Then what is it? This *Mors* or whatever, you saw it, right?"

Pikachu, alarmed by all the commotion, hopped out of Lily's bag and onto the table, cheeks sparking as it sensed a threat to its trainer. The big man recoiled at the sight of it and shouted something in the old tongue. By now, the other patrons had all risen from their seats and watched Lily accusatorily.

"Oh damnit," she said.

Anna had warned her that revealing a strange Pokemon in front of the locals would spook them and that there could be consequences. Lily shouldered her pack and reached out a hand to Pikachu.

"Wait, please, all I want is directions. I mean no harm, I promise. Pikachu won't hurt you," Lily tried.

She was backing up, and the big man was advancing on her. Others joined him in cornering her, and Lily spotted the door just a few feet away.

"O-Okay, I'm going, see?" She backed away towards the door.

But Pikachu did not like the stench of threat in the air and sparked, afraid for Lily's safety. She made it to the door and all but fell outside, dropping the pictures of Mewtwo and the comet in her hustle.

The big man led the the crowd that followed her out, a giant among them.

"Please, I didn't mean---"

But her pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears as a few of the men produced Pokeballs of their own and released their Pokemon onto the street. There was Bouffalant and Stantler, Noctowl and Girafarig, and the big man had a Pangoro as big as he was. It smashed its fists together and growled in warning down at Lily.

"Oh crap," she said to herself.

"You go," the big man said. "Go now."

But Lily was not going anywhere, and this was the second time today she'd been thrown out of a place just for asking a question. Perhaps she was being culturally insensitive, but damnit, Mewtwo was *dangerous* and she had a responsibility to track it down and stop it before it could hurt anybody else. If these people, good intentions or not, tried to impede her in her duties, then she would have to get a little more insensitive with them.

Lily unclipped two Pokeballs from her belt. "Fine. If that's how you wanna play it. I really don't want to hurt any of you, but I can't let you get in my way, either." She released her two Dragonair, and they flanked her protectively, pink on one side and blue on the other. There were a lot more of these locals than Lily, but all she needed was an opening to get away without anybody getting hurt.

The effect, however, was as instantaneous as it was unexpected. Facing the two Dragonair, the locals visibly panicked and those without Pokemon began hastily retreating indoors. Even the big man with his Pangoro had lost most of his bite as he stared at Lily in horror.

"*Balaur*," he said. "*Balaur*!"

He pointed at her like she'd revealed herself as some evil enchantress here to slaughter them all, and Lily did not know what to make of it.

"Wait, what? Tiny, Shiny, be ready," she said, not trusting that Pangoro and the other enemy Pokemon.

Somebody gave a command in the old tongue, and the Bouffalant pawed the ground in warning. Pangoro roared, and the pink Dragonair advanced in an attempt to intimidate it, the pearl on its throat glowing red with building draconian energy.

"I don't want to fight you," Lily tried in a last ditch attempt to avoid a battle she was sure everyone here would regret.

"Your words are useless here. You've shown your hand, and a fight is all you'll be offered from them now."

For a moment, Lily was sure she'd imagined the voice. She'd heard it so often in her dreams that she could never get it out of her head,

sometimes even hearing it like an intimate whisper in the wind, a secret half imagined. But this was no whisper, and she was no dream. If not for the hand she rested on Tiny's back for support, she may have collapsed right there. Slowly, achingly, dreadfully, Lily turned her head.

It can't be, she thought to herself. *He* can't *be*...

But he was. Plainly dressed and hooded, she may not have recognized him from his grandiose memory in her dreams, but she would never forget that voice.

"Lily," he said, those pitiless dark eyes shadowy and unreadable as he sized her up.

Lily's heart leaped into her throat. "Lance..."

"*Balaur*," the big local man spat. He rattled off in his own language, and suddenly Lily had no idea who ought to worry her more.

Lance stepped forward. He wore leather and skins, browns and greys and greens, and he was alone and dusty with the signs of travel. When he spoke next, it was in the old tongue. Lily could only stare in disbelief as he seemed to argue with the locals, ignorant to their conversation. She could not take her eyes from him, still incredulous that he was standing right there. The last time she saw him, he died.

The conversation turned ugly suddenly and violently, and before Lily even knew what was happening, Lance had released a Pokemon. It was one Lily had never seen in person, one few people ever saw. A Dragon, tall as a Tyranitar and covered with glittering red and gold and silver scales, materialized in the light. It held its head high, and with every move it made, its heavy scales clanged together like bells, delicately threatening. Its tail was almost as long as it was tall and armored with more cymbal scales, razor-sharp and capable of smashing through solid stone.

"Oh..." Lily said as she gaped at the Kommo-o, a rare Dragon rumored to live deep in the Kyukai Valley that could hold its own against the likes of Tyranitar and Snorlax easily. Lance had been busy these past eight months.

Shiny the pink Dragonair was watching Lance intently, perhaps as stunned as Lily was to encounter its old trainer alive and well, but it did not approach Lance, still wary of Pangoro and the other Pokemon.

Lily began to panic. If Shiny defied her and sided with Lance, she would be outclassed for sure. No, forget that, Lance could simply force both Shiny and Tiny to join him, and she'd be at his mercy. Just like the last time.

She had to get away from here.

Lance continued to speak harshly to the locals, and Kommo-o's presence only made him sound all the more intimidating and scary. She tuned it out and looked around her for an escape route. North

seemed like a good bet, and it would take her into the valley. Perhaps she could lose him and the locals in the wilds with Dodrio's speed. There was no time to debate the merits of this plan. Lily quickly recalled the two Dragonair, released Dodrio, and mounted the bird. Lance saw what she was doing, but she only focused on getting the hell away from here as fast as humanly possible. Dodrio took off at a hard sprint with an encouraging kick from Lily, and in a matter of seconds, she'd left the little village behind.

Lily did not dare to look back and focused entirely on putting distance between Lance and herself. *Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,* was all she could think over and over. It could not be real. *He* could not be real. They all said he died, drowned alongside Lugia and buried at the bottom of the sea. Ash had promised her that he was gone for good, no one could survive that. She'd seen it herself, Lugia's downfall, the explosive wave when it crashed back into the sea. Even as she reached for Lance, he was just gone, swept away, nothing but a memory that visited her in her dreams where he would forever remain alive. Except he *was* alive. And he was here, somehow. *Why* was he here?

"Faster, Dody!" Lily urged on her bird, desperate to get away, she didn't much care where to.

The Kyukai Valley north of Domus was a lush expanse of softly rolling hills that gave way to dense forest. The trees were orange and red with autumn's enervating touch, as if the world were on fire. Dodrio ran along the river that flowed through Domus, following it north over rocky terrain. Lily kept her eyes open for anything that could shelter her, anywhere she might be able to hole up and hide to just *think*. There was a lake up ahead, clear and blue and covered in green lily pads and algae that flooded some of the forest around its shallower edges. Perhaps she could find some cover there, she thought. No one would follow her into such an inhospitable spot.

Dodrio squawked, unwilling to run through even the shallow water, but Lily urged it on, and soon they were splashing through the flooded forest. The trees here were tall and thin, and there was enough room for even a large Pokemon like Dodrio to pass through without much difficulty. But the canopy was thick and hid her from sight, and Lily felt her racing heart calm a little at the thought that this was probably a good place to find temporary asylum. The swampy forest floor soon gave way to dry land as the forest sloped upwards in a hill. Good, the canopy would cover her and Dodrio could run faster over dry land than in water.

Lily slowed Dodrio to a stop. The three heads were alert and mercifully quiet in this new and potentially dangerous environment, but Lily could see the exhaustion in Dodrio's eyes. It had been running

for days to get her here, and even after its meal earlier, it would not be able to keep this up all day without some proper rest.

"I think we're far enough," Lily said more to herself than to Dodrio. "Let's just stay quiet and go slow now."

Dodrio's massive talons were surprisingly quiet as it walked among the soggy fallen leaves and wove in between trees. All three heads were on high alert and searching in every direction, a perk of having six keen eyes. Pikachu, too, rode on Lily's shoulder and kept its nose to the wind, wary of any sound or movement.

It was quiet out here, even tranquil, but Lily's head pounded with the stressed beating of her heart high on adrenaline and fear, and even the smallest sound made her jump. A Sentret scurried up a tree trunk to hide in its hollow nest, and Lily nearly fell off Dodrio's back at the noise.

"I'm okay, everything's okay. We're all okay, okay?" Lily said. Her hands shook as she fisted Dodrio's feathers.

It felt like she was wandering in the forest for hours. The sun was still up, but this far north, it would set soon despite the early hour. That was okay, once night set in, she could move more freely without risking detection. Maybe Lance wouldn't come after her? She thought about that. Did he have a reason to come after her?

I did sort of ruin all his plans...

But he'd clearly survived on Shamouti Island against all the odds. So if he was alive all this time, why not come after her sooner? If she hadn't come up here, would she have ever even known he was still alive? Maybe he didn't want revenge?

Dodrio spooked suddenly, and Pikachu squeaked frantically. Lily looked around, scared all over again.

"What? What is it?"

All three of Dodrio's heads were watching the canopy for something Lily could not see. She trusted her Pokemon's instincts, though, so she dismounted and recalled Dodrio, backed up against the thickest tree in the vicinity, and clutched the Pokeballs at her hip like a lifeline. She held her breath and willed whatever had caught Pikachu's attention to pass on.

There was no sound that she could hear, and Pikachu had fallen silent, too. Lily dared not move or even breathe, but she was shaking with the fear of not knowing what could have spooked Dodrio, of all the things. They did not have many natural enemies.

Without warning, Pikachu shrieked and leaped off Lily's shoulder, exploding with electricity. Lily barely had time to react when something came barreling through the trees, knocking them over like they were so many stacked dominoes. Pikachu's Thunderbolt startled whatever it was and forced it to slow, just enough time for Lily to

recognize it. The light reflected off its heavy scales, and they clanged together like wind chimes, a sound that chilled her to the bone. Kommo-o's dark eyes betrayed nothing as it caught sight of her, and its many gilded scales began to glow red with draconian energy.

Lily did not even have the breath to scream. All she could do was run. Pikachu was hot on her heels as she dashed through the trees and fumbled with the Pokeballs at her hip. The forest broke up ahead just as she managed to tear them free. A whirring sound cut through the forest, and acting purely on instinct, Lily threw herself to the grassy ground. Scales as large as dinner plates ricocheted off stones and cut clean through the trees as they sped by overhead, razor-sharp and glowing red. Lily covered her ears, the grating clanging sound brash and baneful as they hit rock and earth and water. She rolled over and saw Kommo-o jogging to catch up, its scales tolling with each step.

She scrambled backwards on her rear, but a lake blocked her path behind her. Pikachu bravely jumped in front of her and began to spark, but Lily was done running. She tossed out all her Pokeballs, not taking any chances, and struggled to her feet. Omastar materialized next to her, its hidden beak snapping threateningly as its tentacles slithered over the damp soil to find the lake behind it. Tiny and Shiny entwined and shielded Lily with their bodies fearlessly, and Ampharos towered over Pikachu and began to spark. The air grew acrid and sour with the effect of Ampharos's massive electricity stores. A single direct hit from its Thunder could crippled even such fearsome Pokemon as Machamp and Gyarados, and Kommo-o seemed to know that instinctively. It held its ground at the small army of Dragons blocking it from its target.

"Back off," Lily said, laying a hand each on her two Dragonair.

Kommo-o paced slowly, growling softly and searching for the weak link in Lily's defenses. But the standoff did not last long as another threat approached from the west. Lily looked up at the sound of powerful wings beating the air, and all the blood drained from her face at the sight of Lance descending towards her riding a Charizard.

At least, it looked a little like a Charizard, if Charizard could be black and breathe blue fire. Lily was so stunned at the sight that she was too slow to give her Pokemon a command, and Lance landed next to Kommo-o smoothly. Tiny the blue Dragonair lowered its head, exposing the wicked horn on its head in warning. Lance slipped off the black Charizard's back, and now that he was standing next to it, Lily was horrified to see just how big it was. It had to be nearly twelve feet tall, bigger and bulkier than any Charizard she'd ever seen. And she'd never seen one that was black before. Something about it was different, like it wasn't really a Charizard at all, but something more. She couldn't quite place it.

Lance had not said a word, but he approached now as though Lily did not have five fierce Pokemon ready to defend her.

"S-Stop!" Lily said. "Don't come any closer!"

Lance stopped, though she suspected he did it for his own reasons, not because she'd ordered him to. He seemed to think on her words a moment, and then he pulled down the hood of his mantle. Lily could not help the spike of adrenaline that made her shake at the sight of him fully unmasked. His red hair was shorter than it had been before, and he looked somehow older, the way trauma or loss can age even the young. But those eyes were the same, dark and depthless as an ocean, and in the fading twilight, she could see the faint glimmer upon his angular cheeks, a scaling effect that made him look almost reptilian for just a moment, a trick of the light, proof of who he really was under the facade of humanity. He did not smile. He barely reacted at all.

"You're surrounded," he said matter-of-factly.

"I'm..." Lily trailed off, confused, but when she heard something rippling behind her in the water, she felt like her heart really might burst through her chest.

Whirling, she spotted something rising from the depths of the lake, hidden in the shadows until now. A Lapras, young but healthy-looking, towered tall and proud, its rubbery blue skin slick with water that turned to frost as it dribbled down the length of its neck. The lake water around it began to freeze as it floated there. Omastar hissed and slipped into the water, ready to fight but unwilling to get too close.

Lily racked her mind for some way out of this precarious situation. She still couldn't fully believe this was even *happening*. She hastily drew the crossbow attached to her hip. It was already notched, and she aimed it directly at Lance. "I'm a much better shot now, just so you know."

This time, he did smile. The glint of a sharp incisor drew her eye, and she instinctively ran her tongue over her own sharp teeth. "You only have one shot, and I have a Mega Charizard."

Mega Charizard...

Lily swallowed hard. So that's what it was. Lance must have read the trepidation on her face because he felt confident enough to take another step closer.

"Stop!" Lily said. "I-I know about Mega Pokemon. If I hurt you, Mega Charizard'll feel it, too."

Lance stopped and hesitated.

That's right, Lily thought. *You can't fool me.*

"And I outnumber you," Lily said, feeling a little more confident now.

Lance let her see his eyes rove over her Pokemon. "Do you?"

He raised his right hand, slowly so that she could have no illusions about what he intended, and Lily began to panic all over again. She pushed her way past the two Dragonair, crossbow still trained on Lance, and shielded her Pokemon with her body.

"No!" she bit out, "I won't let you. You'll have to kill me to get to them."

Lance let his hand fall. Lily could not really place it, but something about him felt different. He was Lance, there was no doubt about it, but something about him seemed unfamiliar, something that hadn't been there the last time they'd crossed paths. And his attention was not split between her and Lugia. This time, it was just the two of them.

"You have something of mine," he said at length. "Something I thought I'd lost."

"What?" Lily blinked, but when she saw where he was looking, she got an uncomfortable chill. "Shiny..."

The pink Dragonair was watching Lance intently, curiously, not hostile the way Tiny was.

Lily had a mind to threaten Lance again, but the way he was looking at the pink Dragonair gave her pause. There was emotion in those soulless dark eyes that had not been there before, recognizable and achingly human and so out of place on him, and yet there it was.

"I found Shiny's Pokeball after you..." She cleared her throat. "After the fight. I've been looking after her ever since."

Lance looked at her strangely. "You've been training my Dragonair."

Despite herself, Lily felt a hot blush color her neck and cheeks. "I-I mean, yeah, I couldn't just leave her."

"I raised that Dragonair from an egg. Dragonite's egg. I thought she was dead like all the rest."

Lily's throat clenched. Just a moment ago, he was all but threatening her life, and now they were talking as if all that were forgotten, and he was just reminiscing. *Dragonite's egg.* The Dragonite Lily had killed. The same one that had killed Ash's Charizard. All this time, and Shiny was a part of it...

An inexplicable feeling of guilt made her stomach churn, and she lowered the crossbow a little. Lance reached a hand out again, though, and Lily came to her senses.

"What're you doing?" she demanded. "I told you, I'm not letting you control my Pokemon."

"Then let her choose," Lance said.

"Choose?" *But why would he...*

The pink Dragonair slowly slithered towards Lance but stopped just short of him and looked back at Lily. Dragonair as a species were

very expressive Pokemon, able to display a wide range of emotions with their singing. Tiny sang now, a beautifully elegiac note full of longing and sadness as it slithered protectively around Lily but dared not follow the pink Dragonair. Lily could almost feel Tiny's sadness to see its kin leaving.

But Shiny's signing was uplifting and light as it curled around Lance and lowered its head to his eye level. And Lily stared, slack-jawed, as Lance embraced the pink Dragonair like a parent reunited with a lost child. His eyes were closed as he rested his forehead to Dragonair's and ran his hands over its sleek fuchsia scales. Unbidden, tears stung Lily's eyes at the sight, and she suddenly felt ashamed for witnessing this moment, like she was intruding.

All this time, you never forgot about him...

Lily lowered her crossbow and quietly wiped her eyes. Whatever this was, Lance being alive and being here, none of it mattered. He was just a man who thought he had lost everything until this moment when he regained something precious. Whatever his deal was, whatever he was doing here, it didn't matter. He was never going to summon Lugia again, so he was no real threat. Lily sheathed her crossbow.

"Lance," she said. "I don't want to fight you."

He looked up at her, and for a moment it was like he did not recognize her. But soon the emotions were gone, and he was unreadable and cold.

"Come again?" he said.

"I don't know how you survived, but I really don't care. You can't summon Lugia again, and I'm not here for you, obviously. So just... Just take care of Shiny, and I'll forget I ever saw you here."

His laughter was not the response she expected. "Are you...dismissing me, Lily?"

A shudder of fear ran down her spine hearing him say her name like that. Confronting Lance in person was so much worse than any nightmare that yanked her from sleep and kept her up shivering in bed all night.

"I-I just, um, I don't have any problem with you. We stopped you, and everything's okay now," she said, hating how shaky her voice sounded.

"And what if I have a problem with you?" he said, advancing.

But before he could take another step, Shiny blocked his path.

"Dragonair," he said, the warning evident in his tone.

But the pink Dragonair did not move. Lance raised his hand, and Lily knew what was coming next. He would force Shiny to move. No Dragon could resist the will of a fully-realized Titan. But just when he looked ready to give the command, he didn't. Behind him, Mega

Charizard snorted blue flames, agitated, and Kommo-o was still balanced on its powerful hind legs as if ready to attack at the drop of a hat. But no one moved.

"Dragonair doesn't want me to fight you," Lance said.

"She goes by Shiny now," Lily said. "She likes that nickname."

Lance did not look impressed. "Ridiculous."

"Look, I'm just going to go now, so you can go back to, uh...doing whatever you're doing out here," Lily said.

"I came here to train," Lance said. "Why are you here?"

"That's none of your business."

Lance raised a hand, and Lapras swam closer to shore. The lake froze all around it, and Omastar was forced to retreat to land to escape the frost. Lily wondered if she should've kept her crossbow aimed.

"This valley is a dangerous place," Lance went on. "No one comes here without a good reason, and most never make it out alive."

"Well, you're still alive," Lily countered.

"I'm not most people," he said, smirking. "Or have you forgotten?"

There was that chilling fear again. "No. Did you forget that I beat you last time we met?"

Lance's smirk faded. "Be careful. You may have taken my place and title because I underestimated you, but you couldn't kill me. You never will."

Night was settling in now, and the temperature was dropping. Ampharos's light cast a bright glow, but Lily shivered for lack of heat. She would need to find shelter soon.

"What do you want?" she said. "I already told you I don't want to fight you, so just leave me alone."

"I want to know why you're here," he said. "The natives seemed very upset with you."

"None of your business."

Kommo-o's scales tinkled softly, but far from being pleasant, the sound only exacerbated Lily's anxiety.

"You came here looking for something," Lance went on. "But your title doesn't matter here. You'll die before you find whatever you're looking for."

"In case *you* forgot, I'm not most people, either," Lily snapped.

"*Mors*," Lance said. "That's what you're looking for, right?"

Lily bit her lip, but it was all the admission Lance needed.

"It's a word in the old tongue, the name of a god who was the harbinger of death."

Despite herself, Lily latched onto that new bit of information. "Anna said that when I showed her the picture of the comet, and the men, too. So that's why they were so scared."

"Comet... You mean the one that flew through here two weeks ago," Lance said.

All the breath left Lily's lungs. "You... You saw it?"

Lance watched her carefully. "I saw where it went."

Lily was terrible at hiding her emotions, Ivy was always telling her. She was an open book, easy to gauge and predict to anyone who knew her. And in a way, Lance knew her very well.

"I know how to find it," he said at length.

Lily opened her mouth to speak, but clamped it shut before she could blurt out something she'd regret saying. Of course, *of course*. Leave it to her awful luck to stumble upon the one person who could offer the exact help she needed, and he turned out to be a former terrorist back from the dead. The one person she would never trust even if her life depended on it.

Except it wasn't just her life that depended on finding Mewtwo; it was the lives of every innocent person and Pokemon around that Mewtwo could crush on a vengeful whim once it was fully healed.

Oh boy, I'm in trouble, she thought hopelessly. *No, but I'm smart. I'm smart and I'm in big, big trouble. I can figure this out!*

"You speak the old tongue," Lily said, changing the subject.

If Lance knew what she was doing, he played along anyway. "Of course. Their language is a dialect evolved from it, but I'm a fast learner."

Leave it to Lance the Dragonmaster to find a place for his ego in such a situation. Lily bit her tongue to keep from saying something rude.

"Then you'd know why they were so afraid," she said.

He reached into his fur-lined jacket, and Lily spooked and reached for her crossbow again. When he did not produce a knife or other weapon, she was almost disappointed. But when she saw what he had, she momentarily forgot her caution.

"Where did you get those?" she demanded.

He had the pictures she'd brought, the one of Mewtwo and the one of the comet, and he held them just out of reach for her to see. Pikachu was very wary of Lance and his Dragons and not afraid to show it, and it leaped in front of Lily ready to attack. Lance barely cast it a glance.

"Finders keepers," he said.

"Give them back."

"You want to know about *Mors*," he said smoothly. "I want to know what wiped out the village just west of here. Maybe we can help each other."

Lily stopped hearing him as the dread she'd been carrying with her ever since Mewtwo escaped from Cinnabar Island flooded her with

cold nausea. She hugged her middle and did not trust her knees not to give out. Ampharos was closest and lent her a shoulder to lean on.

"Wiped out," she said. "What do you mean, wiped out?"

Lance did not share her dread. "Three Village is what we southrons call it. To them it's simply Domus, like all the others. I usually go there for supplies, so imagine my surprise to find it razed to the ground. And that...comet," he waved the picture of the comet for emphasis, "was all that was left leaving the village. But it wasn't a comet at all, was it?" He showed her the grainy picture of Mewtwo. "Lily?"

She hated the sound of her name in his voice. He made it sound so soft and insidious, like a poison.

"What monster did you create this time?" he asked.

Something in Lily snapped, and she marched right up to him and shoved the crossbow in his face, fearless. "Mewtwo is *not* a monster."

Lance didn't even flinch with the steel-tipped bolt aimed at his throat. He touched the razor edge with his fingers and pushed it aside. "Mewtwo," he said. "You mean, this?"

Mewtwo's picture was crumpled, and he dangled it in front of her like bait. Lily tried to snatch it, but Lance was expecting this and grabbed her wrist. In the shock of the moment, Lily fired the crossbow, but the bolt missed Lance in their struggle and went awry. It hit Kommo-o with a loud clang, and for a split second Lily feared that she'd killed the Dragon for no good reason. But the bolt ricocheted off Kommo-o's diamond-hard scales and landed in the ground a few feet away, bent out of shape and unsalvageable. Mega Charizard snarled and snorted blue flames, the only sign that it was still standing there when its inky scales melted into the darkness so well. The two enormous Dragons snapped at each other in challenge.

Lance had Lily's wrist in a painful grip, and he dropped the pictures to grab her other wrist. The emptied crossbow fell to the ground with a clatter, and Lily could not wrench free of him. She tried to kick him and lost her balance, and they both went down. Pikachu darted around them frantically sparking but not wanting to shock Lance lest Lily get hurt, too. Tiny and Shiny were crying, unsure how to intervene, but it was over in a matter of seconds. Lance was bigger and physically stronger, and he had Lily pinned hard against the ground. She hissed in pain as his grip on her wrists turned crushing, but shut up very fast when she saw the angry look in his eyes.

"Don't do that again," he said, deathly quiet. After a moment he added, "And your aim hasn't improved at all."

"Let me reload and try again," she spat.

He took his time responding, and Lily wondered what he was thinking, what decisions he was making. "It's getting dark."

Lily was so mad she could have spit, but his latest turn of subject left her speechless once again. He released her and got to his feet, and it was then Pikachu tried to electrocute him. But Shiny intervened with a Protect shield. Pikachu chittered angrily at the betrayal, but the pink Dragonair looped protectively around Lance. Lily got to her feet and dusted herself off.

"Arbok live in this forest," Lance said, oblivious to her indignation. "They'll be out feeding soon. We should find shelter on higher ground."

Lily gaped at him. "I'm sorry, *we*? There's no *we*."

"Do you want to be hunted and eaten alive?"

"Of course not! But I have my Pokemon to protect me."

"Dragons are strong, even the diluted ones." He glanced at Ampharos with barely concealed disdain. "But even they will have trouble facing a nest of fifteen-foot vipers."

Lily could not believe what she was hearing. "Did you leave your sanity at the bottom of the ocean or something? I'm not going *anywhere* with you. I'll take my chances with the snakes, gladly."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. But don't go west unless you want to intrude on Typhlosion's territory. And just north across the lake there's a murmuration of Staraptor. They'll thank you for your Pikachu, among other things."

"It's none of your business where I go."

It sounded childish to Lily's ears, and she imagined Lance heard it, too.

"Well then," Lance said dismissively. "If you survive the night, I'll find you in the morning, wherever you go. And then I'll allow you to ask for my help finding this Mewtwo creature you're looking for."

Lily had never been so offended in all her life. "You'll *allow*... Go to hell, Lance. You're a murderer and a terrorist, and I don't want anything from you. I wish you'd stayed drowned."

He said nothing as he watched her, but his silence spoke volumes. She could almost feel the black emotions rolling off him. And like the bleeding heart she sometimes hated being, a very tiny part of Lily felt bad about shouting such awful things at him.

"All right," he said. "Goodnight, Lily."

And with that, he recalled Lapras from the lake and showed her his back as he retreated to the forest. Mega Charizard spread its malevolent black wings and took to the sky, invisible in the darkness, and Kommo-o followed. Shiny the pink Dragonair lingered and let out a long and mournful note, but it, too, followed Lance into the forest. The pictures of Mewtwo and the comet, crinkled and torn, lay on the ground. Lily sniffled and picked them up to pocket them.

Tiny whined softly in concern and nudged her shoulder, and

Ampharos padded towards the forest, checking to make sure Lance and his Pokemon had truly gone. Pikachu squeaked and jumped up on Lily's shoulder, and Omastar was busy digging its tentacles in the soft sandy lake shore in search of food. Lily wiped her brow and tried to breathe deeply to slow her racing heart. She felt like she'd just run a marathon.

"Okay," she said shakily. "Okay."

She looked around and wondered where she should go to get away from Lance. If she stayed here, he would probably find her again, but if she put some distance between them, she might elude detection. Except to the north there were raptor birds as big as Dodrio, and to the west there were Typhlosion that could melt through solid stone with their fire. And back the way she'd come there were giant snakes. Lovely.

"I can do this," she cheered herself on. "I came this far already."

Lily recalled all her Pokemon but Dragonair and Pikachu and mounted Dragonair's back. The sleek sapphire Dragon took to the skies at a leisurely pace and soared over the lake. She'd take her chances with the Staraptor, she decided. See how bold they were when she had an Ampharos looking out for her.

As she glided on the night winds, she searched the skies for signs of that black Mega Charizard. It could be following her and she'd never see it coming. But nothing attacked, and the world below was tranquil and silent.

"This can't be happening," Lily said to herself.

But every movement out of the corner of her eye as she flew, every undulation in the darkness, every shadow beyond the reach of the campfire she built once she'd landed and found a good place to make camp, she thought it was Lance following her, stalking her like one of the powerful creatures that made this valley their home. He was out there somewhere in this place that was so far from everything she knew, this lonely place where the two of them were the only people around for miles, and she had survived her second encounter with him. She wondered if the next time she'd be so lucky.

Chapter 6

The Staraptor and Staravia that lived just north of the lake that Lance had warned Lily about were indeed voracious in their appetites. Piles of blanched bones marked the locations of their nests, huge bundles of sticks, reeds, and moss high up in the trees far out of reach of any grounded Pokemon that might make a meal out of any unattended Starly hatchlings. The birds were not very active at night save for the scouts that kept watch for the rest of the flock. One look at Ampharos, though, and the birds left Lily and her Pokemon unmolested. It was in the wee hours of the morning that she encountered some difficulty.

The Staravia were small, about the size of Ampharos itself and too small for a person to mount. They were easy enough to keep at bay. But the Staraptor were not only as large as Pidgeot, but they were also numerous and bold. An Ampharos was a threat to any bird no matter how large, but a whole murmuration of Staraptor? Not so much.

Lily woke to find Pikachu squeaking in fright as a particularly brash Staraptor swooped down to snatch it up right out of Lily's makeshift camp. Pikachu exploded with lightning and managed to electrocute Staraptor badly enough to send it flying off in an angry retreat, its tail feathers singed and its great taloned feet burned, but others circled as they rode the wind currents and conserved energy, waiting for an opportune moment to strike. Ampharos fired off Thunderbolts that sent a clear message not to approach, but it couldn't keep it up all day. So Lily was forced to get up, pack her things, and set out. Not wanting to encounter any trouble, she released Dodrio and Dragonair to be her eyes and ears while Ampharos rested in its Pokeball.

"Is it going to be like this every night?" she wondered glumly.

Despite the presence of predators that would sooner pick her clean to the bone if they could sink their claws into her, Lily had to admire the beauty of this place. Now that it was morning and she could see clearly, she got a good view of the valley. The Staraptor lived in a part of the forest that was elevated and opened up onto a broad hilltop that looked down on the lake where she'd faced off with Lance the night before. The lake was the most stunning shade of cerulean blue Lily had ever seen and crystal clear. It had seemed deep and dark last night, but now she could see the bottom clearly. Fallen tree trunks had sunk to the bottom and made homes for various aquatic Pokemon. They swam out in the open, fat Magikarp and Finneon, as well as what Lily was sure had to be Milotic, though it moved quickly and could have been a trick of the light. But Milotic could grow as large as

Gyarados if left to their own devices, and it was strange that the Staraptor did not dive in to snatch the slow and ungainly fish glugging away.

"It *is* deep," she realized. "It's gotta be a couple hundred feet deep, but the water's so clear... Wow, amazing!"

Even out here fighting for her survival and lost in the wilderness, there was beauty to be found. It was everywhere Lily looked. Now the only question was where she should look to pick up Mewtwo's trail. It was still weak and recovering. The antidote Blaine had given it would cure the disease, but it would not heal the damage. For that, Mewtwo would have to find someplace safe to recover and rest. But with so many strong Pokemon prowling this place, why had it come here? Was there someplace in this vast expanse that *was* safe? She had no idea, much less how to find it. Mewtwo had flown northwest, that was all she knew. But to the west were those Typhlosion Lance had warned her about, and who knew what lay farther north?

"Where did you go, Mewtwo?"

There was no answer. All Lily could do was push onward and hope for the best. If only the natives in Domus had been willing to help her...

Lance was willing to help me.

"No, you be quiet, brain," Lily scolded herself. "I won't even entertain that thought. No ma'am."

She shook out her head and took a deep breath of the clean air. It tasted good up here. She could do this, and she did not need Lance's help. He would just betray her or end up trying to kill her again, and she didn't need the hassle. The thought would not be entertained, and that was that.

Lily breaked for lunch by yet another of the many lakes that dotted the landscape, this one overgrown with some kind of algae that dyed the water a deep jade. Just as she was getting comfortable and enjoying the scenic view on the shore, a truly enormous Whiscash jumped out of the water and tried to take a bite out of her for no good reason. Lily screamed and scrambled backwards away from the shoreline, and Pikachu fired off a Thunderbolt. The lightning hardly fazed Whiscash, which was waddling on the muddy bank and snapping its wide mouth, drawn to the smell of Lily's food or perhaps Lily herself. Dragonair slithered in quick and rammed the huge blue fish with a Dragon Tail attack that sent it flying and crash-landing in a deeper part of the stagnant lake.

"Oh my *god*!" Lily said, her heart racing as she hurriedly gathered her pack and put some distance between the lake and herself. "Did you see that?! Did you see the size of that thing?!" she said. Pikachu cocked its head cutely, an Dragonair went back to the food it had been

eating. She calmed down a bit as the initial shock wore. "Geez, that was way too close."

"Have you had enough?"

Lily yelped at the sound of Lance's voice so close behind her and spun around fast enough to give herself a head rush. Charizard was in its normal state, orange and snarling like any true Charizard, and Kommo-o was chewing on something bloody, the remnants of its last meal. Shiny the pink Dragonair was there, too, and called to Lily's Dragonair. They circled each other affectionately.

"I--- Are you *following* me?" Lily demanded. "Because that's what it looks like. This valley's huge, you know, and you just happen to find me here? You're definitely following me, okay, don't think I don't know that. What do you want?"

"Do you always ask so many questions?" Lance said.

"I do, actually. Is that a problem? Hey, don't change the subject you, uh, you stalker."

"...So I'm a stalker now?" He looked like he might laugh at her.

Lily made an exasperated noise and hiked her pack higher on her shoulders. "I'm leaving now. Let's go, Tiny."

"You have something that belongs to me," Lance said.

To her chagrin, he was following her again. Lily forced herself to take a calming breath and said, "What's that?"

"Dragonair's Pokeball."

She did still have it, the Pokeball with a silver star stamped onto it. Lily fished it out of her pocket. It was old and scuffed from years of use---Lance's use. Suddenly, she did not want to give it up.

"This is Shiny's Pokeball," she said. "She would've drowned in it if I hadn't found it after, um..."

Lance approached again, his boots crunching on the fallen leaves by the shore, and Lily tensed. She went for the crossbow again, fully loaded with a fresh bolt, but he stopped. Lance gave her a withering look, almost frustrated, and pursed his lips together like he'd eaten something distasteful.

"...Thank you for that," he said at length.

Lily blinked, unsure she'd heard him right. "Oh. Well, uh...you're welcome. But I didn't do it for you. I thought you were dead."

"Did you?"

"Huh?"

"Did you truly think I was dead?" he pressed.

"I... I mean, everyone thought so after what happened," Lily said.

"Yes, I read the papers," Lance said. "But what did you think?"

She shook her head at him. She could not read him, and every time she realized that, she resented her own limitations. Maybe if she were more like Ivy, she could get into his head, glean his intentions. As she

was, Lance was a mystery to her now more than ever.

"I accepted your death," she said.

"Accepting is not the same as believing," Lance said.

"...No," she admitted. She debated lying, but Lance was a Titan and a master liar. Surely, he'd smell a lie from her before she could even get the words out. "I didn't really believe you could be dead."

"Why? You were closest to me. You saw exactly what happened. In fact, I remember you even tried to save me."

Lily recoiled in disgust. "Save you? No, I never did that."

He held her gaze, and he didn't have to say anything to unravel that little lie. Lily averted her gaze and hugged her arms.

"I mean, I never would've made it even if I'd wanted to help you. But I just..."

"Just?"

She glared up at him. "It's not like I want to see people die."

"No, you just want them to stay dead once the deed is done."

Lily had half a mind to fight him on that, but she bit her tongue. Her words to him last night about wishing he'd stayed dead were like a thorn in her side. Would she had said such a nasty thing if he were anyone else? No, but this was *Lance*. He'd done terrible things, unforgivable things. If he'd just stayed buried, then the world would be better off.

"It's hard not to when they've done such terrible things," she said reluctantly.

"We all strive to be monstrous in our own ways, and we in turn may do terrible things, great things. Speaking of which, are you ready to track down yours?"

Lily wanted to punch him. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Mewtwo's not a monster, and I didn't create it. I'm trying to save it."

"Ah, of course, my mistake," Lance said, not mistaken at all judging from his flippant tone of voice. "But you do have to find it in order to save it, as you claim."

"I'm not claiming anything! It's the truth. I'm not like you, Lance. I don't lie about everything."

Lance said nothing to that, and a tense silence stretched between them.

"Dragonair's Pokeball," he said, holding his hand out. "If you don't mind."

Lily chucked the ball at him, an admittedly childish act that nonetheless made her feel marginally better until he caught it effortlessly. He was even good at this, the scoundrel. Whatever, she did not need to hang around here another minute. He had what he

wanted, and that was that.

"Come on, guys," Lily said. "Let's get out of here."

Dodrio, Dragonair, and Pikachu followed her, but Dragonair seemed sad to leave its pink counterpart with Lance.

"And stop stalking me, or next time I *will* fight you," Lily said with a steadiness she did not quite feel. But he didn't need to know that.

She munched on her lunch on the road, resolved that there must be countless scenic spots in this valley and that she didn't much need to lose face over this one. There would be others where Lance wouldn't follow. He didn't follow her now as she marched off.

Over the next two days, Lily hardly encountered any wild Pokemon, and there was no sign of Lance. She looked for him over her shoulder, expecting him to leap out of the trees and bother her with this ludicrous idea of leading her to Mewtwo. If he knew where Mewtwo was, then what was stopping him from going after it himself? As far as Lily was concerned, he was full of it.

Unless he needed something from her. What could that be? What if this was all a trap and he was actually herding her to some dark corner of the valley to her death? As she lay in her thermal sleeping bag on a bed of pine needles staring up at the stars, all these questions rattled in her head.

"What does he even want?" she wondered aloud.

Dodrio's left head, the one that was keeping watch while the other two slept, cocked in question. Pikachu yawned in the sleeping bag next to her and snuggled closer. The moon was out and reflected in the lake nearby, though Lily had made sure to set up her camp far enough away to avoid any further Whiscash surprises.

"Don't you think it's weird, Dody?" Lily asked.

Dodrio's waking head fixed a sharp eye on her, but it made no response. *Duh, birds can't talk, you dummy.* Although Lily had always liked to think that each of Dodrio's three heads would have a different voice and a different personality. The thought made her smile.

"You're the best listener of the three. Don't tell them I said that," Lily said.

Dodrio ruffled its feathers and went back to scanning the skies for any sign of the black Mega Charizard or other nocturnal threats. Lily sighed and tried to go back to sleep.

She must have fallen asleep because she woke with a start, though there was nothing around. Dodrio's middle head was awake and keeping watch along with Dragonair, and they both stirred when Lily jerked awake. It was hard to breathe, and she clutched her throat. She wanted to gag, but her belly was empty and she was nowhere near water. She had not drowned, as she'd dreamed yet again. Rubbing her eyes, Lily crawled out of her sleeping bag, disturbing Pikachu in the

process. The little rodent was still half asleep and yawned.

"Sorry, ChuChu. Bad dream," she said.

There was no way she was getting back to sleep now, so she packed up her camp, scooped up Pikachu, and headed out with Dodrio and Dragonair acting as guards and lookouts. The sun was just breaching the eastern horizon, and morning mist covered the valley, lending the place an ethereal and lonely atmosphere. It swirled around Lily's boots and parted with each step. Her feet squelched with the next step she took, and she froze.

"What? Oh!"

It was hard to see with the mist spread so far, but she'd wandered to the edge of another vast lake. The mist rose off it like smoke, and Lily released Omastar.

"Hey Nauty," Lily greeted the large nautilus. "Feel like a morning dip?"

Omastar clicked its beak and sank below the mist into the deeper water.

"Well, that's great for you, but I'll have to go around."

Dragonair slipped into the water and swam along the shoreline. The mists parted for it like curtains, and in Dragonair's wake, Lily could see the crystal clear waters of the lake. She'd spent a little time studying Dragonair when she wasn't busy working on Mewtwo's cure, but she discovered rather quickly that there was so much the scientific community did not know about Dragons. Like Ghosts, Dragons were rarely encountered in the wild and usually very dangerous to humans. Dragonair could not fly in the traditional sense, but it had some kind of power over wind and water that allowed it to bend air currents and glide through the air. It bent the water as it swam and dispelled the mists in its path, but Lily just felt her boots getting soaked as she trudged through the mists.

"One day, Tiny, you have to show me how you do that," she said.

It was a chilly morning and Lily shivered as she hiked, but the views were too breathtaking to really be upset. Rolling hills rose in the distance, shrouded in mist that slowly receded as the sun crept higher and higher in the sky. A nye of Unfezant and Tranquill soared in V-formation, honking and squawking as they descended on the rivers and lakes to fish for their breakfasts. A huge herd of Bouffalant was making its way west down the mountains to graze on the fertile valley floor.

"Doesn't anybody come out here to study all these Pokemon?" Lily wondered aloud. "Seems like kind of a waste..."

Her morning hike north around the lake lasted a good hour and a half, and by then she was getting hungry, so she stopped to chew on some dried fruit she'd brought along and sat down in the grass. It was

a chilly day, but the sky was clear and the sun was warm on her cheek. Pikachu yawned and stretched out on its back to paw at the air.

"Oh, I know what you want," Lily said playfully.

She scratched Pikachu's belly, and the little Electric rodent squeaked happily at the attention. Dodrio and Dragonair had wandered off toward the river to fish for their lunch, so Lily released Ampharos to keep an eye out. The Light Pokemon was drawn to the sweetgrass and bent down on its stubby front legs to graze. Pikachu lost interest in Lily's petting and ran around Ampharos in an attempt to start a game. Ampharos was more concerned with grazing and ignored Pikachu. Static electricity jumped in between them, and Lily wondered what it felt like to them. Maybe ticklish? She smiled at the thought. It must be so neat to be a Pokemon.

Lily lay back and got comfortable. The grass was soft and dry now that the sun was up, and despite the chill, she almost wished she could fall asleep right here. Surely, no nightmares would visit her now when the world around her was so lovely and peaceful. Her eyes grew heavy, and the sound of Ampharos's munching had a soporific effect. She began to doze, floating in and out of sleep. In the distance, as though through a gauzy haze, she thought she heard a soft pounding sound, pleasant in its rhythm. But as it grew louder, something shrill jolted her awake. Pikachu was chittering excitedly and leaking static. Lily's bangs were starting to stand on end. She rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn.

"Huh? What's going on, ChuChu?"

Ampharos was very close and standing erect, very still. Lily frowned and pushed herself up on her elbows. Ampharos's large ears twitched to absorb sound, but otherwise it remained deathly still.

"Amphy?" she said.

The pounding sounded again, very close now. It sounded more like smacking now that Lily thought about it, and she got to her knees and shouldered her pack. The glass grass grew taller and thicker farther out, and it was hard to see well. But about fifty yards away, she saw *something*. The taller glass grass in the distance was shaking violently, and another smack cracked like thunder as whatever was shaking the grass moved around. Dodrio and her other Pokemon were still by the river a distance away.

"What was that?" Lily said, afraid to speak too loudly.

Movement caught her eye---more shaking grass and something that sounded like grunting. She counted the patches of shaking grass that concealed whatever was making those violent smacking sounds, but it was impossible to keep track of them all. Maybe seven? Eight? They were getting closer. The red pearls on Ampharos's tail and forehead began to glow with stored power.

"I think we should just go," Lily said, backing up. "Amphy, ChuChu---"

An explosive smacking sound forced Lily to cover her ears, and something large and round was hurled into the air. It landed with a thud in the shorter sweetgrass closer to Lily and the river and rolled. The creature grunted angrily and got to its feet as though it had not just been violently thrown forty feet. Lily covered her mouth to stifle a gasp at the sight of the fat Hariyama regaining its bearings not twenty feet away.

It was about five feet tall at its full height and covered in bristly hair. Its ample belly was crisscrossed with scars, relics of old fights, and its leathery fists were as large as dinner plates. Although tubby and slow to the untrained eye, Hariyama was one of the most physically adroit Fighting-type Pokemon known to man, able to toss even fully-evolved Golem with its mighty fists.

The shaking grasses were converging, and Lily could see even more Hariyama emerging. One smacked its belly, a challenge to the others, and Lily suddenly felt faint as she realized what was happening. Male Hariyama famously dueled each other for the right to mate, and the spectacle was supposed to be magnificent to behold. As expert Fighters, they could tackle multiple rivals and throw their weight around for days over hundreds of miles, fighting until only one male remained standing above the rest. Human wrestlers who fought for entertainment emulated male Hariyama's techniques and behavior in the ring. Lily had seen one such televised wrestling match featuring Kahuna Hala from Melemele Island in Alola, a Bellator as strong as any Gym Leader, and was fascinated by how he moved so much like a Pokemon. Of course, that was television. This was the real thing, and Lily had a feeling that being caught in the middle of this mating ritual could end very badly for her.

"Amphy, ChuChu," she said. "Back up *slowly*."

The Hariyama that had been smacking its belly in challenge charged at the one that had been thrown, and they clashed like Sumo wrestlers in the arena. The thunderous collision was so deafening that Lily cried out as she covered her ears in fright. The dueling Pokemon were too focused on beating each other to a pulp, but the others had noticed Lily and her Pokemon and were now watching them suspiciously.

"Uh-oh," she said, backing up faster. Her head was spinning and her ears were ringing.

The movement seemed to draw them, however, and suddenly three hulking Hariyama were waddling toward her. Could she outrun them? She had no idea. Electricity jumped along Ampharos's rubbery body as it became more and more agitated by the Fighters. Slowly, Lily

reached out a hand for Pikachu.

"C'mon, ChuChu, up here," she said, never taking her eyes off the Hariyama.

Pikachu leaped onto Lily's outstretched arm and perched on her shoulder. There was a tense moment where nobody moved and Lily hardly breathed.

Oh my god, there's twelve of them, she realized as she counted the Hariyama emerging from the tall grass.

One of the Hariyama grunted angrily and stomped the ground in a show of bravado, and Ampharos leaked electricity in warning. The grass around it charred black and the air popped. At the drop of a hat and without warning, the tense hesitation snapped and the closest Hariyama charged. Big and round, Hariyama nevertheless moved like a wrecking ball once it got going, and Lily barely had time to be horrified as it threw itself at Ampharos.

"Amphy!"

Ampharos exploded with pent-up electricity that struck Hariyama dead center. The massive Thunder attack delivered at such close range was impossible to avoid, and Hariyama convulsed mid-charge. The smell of cooked flesh was acrid and sour and suddenly everywhere, and Lily gagged. Hariyama stumbled and face-planted on the ground. The bristly hair that covered its body curled and blackened, and ugly red welts rose on its scarred skin where the Thunder attack flayed its flesh. It jerked unnaturally, and a foul-smelling liquid began to pool under it. The body lay mere feet away from Lily.

"Oh no," she said.

The other Hariyama beat their bellies and bellowed, angry at the intervention in their ritual, and all of them charged at once. Lily screamed.

"Run!"

She took off sprinting as fast as she could, and Ampharos loped along after her. It wasn't a runner by nature, but if they could just make it to the river where Lily's other Pokemon were, then she could recall it and run away much faster on Dodrio. The earth shook as the heavyweight Hariyama pounded after her, momentarily united against the outsider who had inadvertently interfered in their hallowed mating rituals. The river was just ahead, and Lily could see Dragonair's head poking out from the depths as it enjoyed the relaxing current.

"Tiny!" she shouted.

Something slapped the ground just a few yards behind, and Lily lost her balance and fell face forward. One of the Hariyama had Wake-Up Slapped the ground, and the tremor reverberated with enough force to open a shallow fissure. One direct hit from a Hariyama's open

palm and every bone in her body would shatter.

Lily scrambled to stand, and Pikachu bravely hopped down from her shoulder to help Ampharos keep the Fighters at bay. Together, they unleashed a devastating Thunderbolt attack that rearranged the landscape and buffeted the nearest Hariyama back. But even the threat of electrocution did not deter the single-minded Fighters, rancorous and wild as they were. A loud squawk nearly made Lily cry in relief as Dodrio, having heard her distress, leaped clean over her head and landed hard on the ground in front of her. Its three squabbling heads were united in the face of the imminent threat, and they squawked together in cacophonous fury, a warning. But there was only one of Dodrio and eleven virile Hariyama.

"Dody, to me!" Lily said. "ChuChu, Amphy!"

Pikachu was quick and rejoined Lily, while Dodrio continued to squawk at the Hariyama. It's three heads aimed together and fired off a Tri Attack that exploded on contact with the ground and a Hariyama too slow to get out of the way, but the Fighter took the attack in the belly and was still standing. An ugly char mark marred its belly and had burned away the hair covering it, but it was otherwise unscathed. Dodrio's attack only served to piss it off more, and from the looks of it, this one was the largest and most dominant male of the group at a tremendous seven feet tall and as thick around as a boulder. It stomped the ground, one foot at a time, as it geared up to charge wildly at Dodrio and Ampharos.

Dragonair picked that time to slither to Lily's side, and Omastar waddled along behind it, slow and ungainly on land. Lily quickly recalled the ancient Nautilus and called to Dodrio again. This time, the bird retreated and bent down to let her mount. Ampharos fired off another Thunderbolt, but it was facing three Hariyama, including the dominant male of the group, and they were bold and unafraid of its lightning.

"Amphy!" Lily shouted as she climbed onto Dodrio's back. "Tiny, help Amphy!"

Dragonair took off, the pearl at its throat glowing red as it powered up an attack. The Dragon Pulse beam shot off as fast as a laser and slammed into one of the smaller Hariyama just as it managed to Arm Thrust the slower Ampharos. Ampharos took the attack in its electrified flank and went flying, but not before it electrocuted Hariyama. A split second later, the sinister red Dragon Pulse hit Hariyama and crippled it where it stood. Smoke rose from its back where the attack connected, and blood ran from its wound generously.

"Oh no, Amphy! Let's go, Dody!" Lily urged Dodrio on to check on Ampharos, and Lily dismounted, afraid for her Pokemon.

Ampharos was struggling to stand. It had taken the direct hit and favored its side, but it managed to get to its feet. An ugly purple bruise was spreading over its side, and Lily did her best not to panic about the internal bleeding and broken bones it had likely suffered. Lily laid her hands on the tender spot gently.

"It's okay, Amphy, I'll get you fixed up, I promise," she said, hating how her voice shook.

The Hariyama were still coming after her. She didn't want to fight them when they were just trying to defend their territory from intruders, but unless she could escape, she didn't see any other choice. There were so many of them, and they seemed like they would not stop unless forced to. She had to get Ampharos out of here.

"Amphy, back in the Pokeball. We've got to go," Lily said, fishing in her pocket for Ampharos's Pokeball.

Pikachu leaped from Dodrio's back and exploded with lightning, drawing the Hariyama's attention to it. To Lily's horror, the bulky Fighters were surrounding Dodrio and Dragonair, cutting off their escape. Dodrio might still be able to make a break for it, but she had to move fast. She fumbled with Ampharos's Pokeball and dropped it in her haste.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed as she dropped to her knees to pick it back up.

Two Hariyama nearest to her beat their bellies proudly, the sound waves sending powerful reverberations through their thick bodies. Lily blanched as she realized what they were doing. After a Belly Drum, a Hariyama could reach the highest echelons of its physical potential. These two had their sights on Ampharos and Lily.

"No, you stay back!" Lily shouted at them as she tried to shield Ampharos with her body.

Dragonair was drawn to her distress and made a beeline for her just as the two Hariyama were getting ready to pummel her with their clubby fists.

"Dragon Pulse!" Lily shouted.

Dragonair fired up another deadly attack, but Ampharos pushed Lily to the ground out of the way at the last second and fired an attack of its own. Crimson static danced over Ampharos's body, and it launched a Dragon Pulse of its own to join Dragonair's for a devastating combination attack. The ground burst and one of the Hariyama got caught up in the blast. The raw draconian energy was strong enough this time to burn a hole through its fatty belly and gut it like a pig on a spit. Hariyama choked and grunted as it clutched its belly, now little more than a weeping red ruin of spilling entrails. Lily stared in shock.

"What... Amphy?"

A commotion at the back of the herd of Hariyama sent the rest of the Fighters into a frenzy. Black and blue fire rained down from the sky as a black Mega Charizard flew past out of nowhere and burned the glass grass below. Dodrio squawked in surprise when a bolt of pale ice zigzagged past it and froze a path in between it and the Hariyama it had been attempting to Drill Peck to death, spooking them both. Lapras was attacking from the river at a safe distance.

"Lance," Lily said as she saw the black Mega Charizard swoop around again to deliver another molten Flamethrower at the glass grass. It did not appear to be aiming for the Pokemon themselves, but the flames forced Hariyama to move south, creating a rift between Lily and them.

She didn't know why he was here or what he was doing helping her, of all people, but right now she didn't have the luxury of time to question it. She retrieved Ampharos's Pokeball and recalled it, and Dragonair right after. Pikachu and Dodrio were together, confused and afraid of Lapras's sudden intervention and the ongoing threat of the furious Hariyama. Lily ran to them, intending to mount Dodrio now and make a run for it, but Mega Charizard landed in between them with a rush of heat. Lance was mounted on its back.

"Get on," he ordered.

"What? No way!" Lily said without thinking.

"Your bird can't fly. There's no other way with the Hariyama here."

He thrust a hand out to her, and Lily hesitated for just a split second.

This is crazy!

"Lily, come with me!" Lance shouted to be heard over the bedlam and burning.

The Hariyama were bellowing for blood and vengeance, and they were closing in. Lily's body moved without her consent, as though pulled by instinct in the rush of the moment, and took Lance's offered hand to mount Mega Charizard behind him. She recalled Dodrio and Lance recalled Lapras. Pikachu barely made the jump up Mega Charizard's back leg to reach Lily's shoulder as the beast took off again, and Lily yelped as she was jostled. She grabbed Lance by the waist for dear life as Mega Charizard took off at high speed over the Hariyama's heads.

"Look out!" Lily screamed as she saw two Hariyama work together to Vital Throw a third Hariyama after them like a cannonball.

"Dragon Claw!" Lance shouted.

Mega Charizard roared and ripped its glowing red claws into the careening Hariyama. Pikachu squeaked in fright as it dug its little claws into Lily's shoulder to hang on, and Lily nearly slipped off Mega Charizard's back as it twisted. She bit down on her tongue hard as the

Dragon Claw collided with Hariyama's full-body attack and gasped in pain, tasting blood, but she didn't fall. Lance had a firm grip on her wrist with one hand while the other anchored them both to Mega Charizard's back. Hariyama crashed back to earth, smoking, and Mega Charizard continued on like nothing had happened.

Lily forced herself to breathe and not throw up all over Lance. She was shaking from head to toe in shock at the near brush with death, and the wind buffeting Mega Charizard's flight did not help at all.

"Hold on or you'll fall," Lance said. He still had a grip on her wrist.

Lily did not trust her voice, afraid she might actually throw up if she opened her mouth. So she nodded against his back and fisted his shirt. Satisfied that she wouldn't jump to her death, he let go and focused on directing Mega Charizard's flight. It was a short flight, but Lance flew low to the ground, which contributed to Lily's vertigo watching the hills and forest and lakes whoosh by so close below. He touched them down at the edge of a lake surrounded by forest and fed by a tiered waterfall twenty feet tall. The frothing water was clear as the blue sky above, and from the quick aerial view Lily got, there did not appear to be any Whiscash lurking in the depths waiting for unsuspecting women to wander too close on their lunch breaks.

Mega Charizard touched down surprisingly smoothly, and Lily quickly slipped off its back to stand on solid ground and put some distance between Lance and herself. Pikachu crouched on all fours at her feet, sparking in warning as Lance dismounted more slowly and deliberately. For a moment he said nothing as he laid a hand on Mega Charizard's flank. The black beast growled and leaked noxious smoke from its nostrils as it surveyed the area and Lily warily.

Lily waited for him so say something, but when he did not, she lost her nerve. "What're you---"

Lance put up a hand to silence her, and she was so stunned at his flippancy that she shut up. He once more placed his hand on Mega Charizard's flank and closed his eyes. He took a deep slow breath, and when he exhaled, the most extraordinary thing happened. Mega Charizard's black coloring began to recede to the point of contact, like a shadow retreating from the rising sun. Mega Charizard lost a couple feet of height, and the spectral blue flames on its tail brightened to their natural orange hue. In a matter of seconds, Mega Charizard had transformed back into a normal Charizard. When Lance removed his hand, Lily could make out the faded stain of old blood roughly in the shape of a handprint.

Its duty discharged, Charizard retreated to a spot by the forest in a huff. It blasted a patch of grass with cinders from its nostril, charring the earth and trampling it underfoot. At last satisfied, it curled up on the ground and folded its wings around its body to rest, though it

remained awake and alert. The flame on its tail burned in silence and turned the surrounding grass black, but the fire did not spread. Lily just stared in disbelief.

"You seemed to know so much about Mega Evolution before," Lance said.

"I read a paper about it," Lily said, hardly recognizing her own voice.

"Of course you did," he said like he was neither surprised nor impressed. Unlike before, he did not approach her. "But seeing is believing, I'm sure you would agree."

"Yeah..."

He said nothing further, and Lily began to wish he would. *She* had no idea what to say to him after all that. Pikachu was still agitated, crouched on all fours with its ears and tail erect and ready to shock Lance if necessary, but Lily gave no command. He wasn't moving or talking, and they just stood there watching each other.

Lily gasped. "Oh my god, Amphy!" She fished out Ampharos's Pokeball and set her pack on the ground. She brought some Super and Hyper Potions along for the trip just in case. If she was successful and actually caught up to Mewtwo, something told her she'd want some extra help in case things got ugly.

Ampharos appeared in a flash of white light looking tense and fearful. The bruising on its side had gotten worse, and faint static jumped along its skin. It smelled Charizard lounging nearby and made a distressed mewling sound, betraying its pain. Charizard watched Ampharos carefully, but it did not rise. They were not natural predators, but as long as Ampharos was wounded, it was vulnerable. Lily was busy filling a sterilized hypodermic needle with Hyper Potion from a bulbous glass vial and whispering reassurances to Ampharos. The static on its skin was making it hard to inject the healing agent.

It was only now that Lance approached, and as soon as he did, the static covering Ampharos like armor became more intense and too dangerous to touch.

"Don't come any closer," Lily warned Lance. "You're scaring Amphy."

Lance betrayed nothing of his inner feelings. "You can't treat it like that."

"He just needs to calm down, and you're not helping." To Ampharos she said, "It's okay, Amphy, I'm here, see? You're gonna feel better in no time."

Ampharos was very anxious and in a great deal of pain, and facing an unfamiliar Titan in Lance and his Charizard not far off was not helping matters.

"You can make Ampharos calm down with a simple command,"

Lance said. "You're not incapable of it."

Lily glared up at him. "Just because I can doesn't mean I should."

He looked at her strangely. "Why not?"

She was about to snap at him again, but there was no mocking in his question. He truly wanted to know. Somehow, that made it worse, like talking to a child who had not yet learned the difference between right and wrong. Except Lance was no child. "Why not? Why shouldn't I force Amphy to do whatever I tell him to? Because it's wrong. Amphy's not some zombie mind slave."

"It's a Dragon descendant," Lance said like it was the most natural thing in the world. "It must obey you."

If Ampharos wasn't clearly suffering, Lily would have hit him. Or she would have tried to. He would probably restrain her, but that never stopped her before. Pikachu squeaked, unsure whether to remain on the defensive since Lance did not appear to be attacking. It looked back at Lily for guidance.

"I don't do that kind of thing," Lily said, resolving to ignore him from here on out and focus on soothing Ampharos enough to administer treatment. "It's okay, Amphy. You're safe now, take it easy."

She touched her fingers to Ampharos's skin and winced at the burn in her palm. Pikachu chittered in alarm and scampered around Ampharos, unsure what to do about its trainer's obvious pain. But it was not for nothing, and Ampharos withdrew its static at Lily's touch and focused on her. Big dark eyes glazed with pain held hers, and she blinked away the stress tears that threatened to fall with a bright smile.

"That's it, you're okay," she said, trying not to yank her wounded hand back.

Ampharos sagged into her touch, the fight or flight response quelled, and Lily took the opportunity to quickly empty the Hyper Potion into the bruised area. She drained the syringe and withdrew it just as quickly before Ampharos could spook again.

"There you go, all better. You can rest now, okay? You definitely earned it," she soothed as she ran her good hand up and down its neck.

Ampharos lowered its wide head and nudged her shoulder with its nose. After a moment of the trusting contact, Lily recalled it to its Pokeball and clutched her wounded hand to her chest. Pus-filled welts had risen along the lines of her palm, making it agony to close a fist. Some had popped and leaked a pinkish ooze down her fingers. Nothing a little Super Potion salve couldn't soothe. She was a lefty, anyway, and didn't see much need for making a fist with her right hand. No big deal. Opening up the Super Potion bottle with one hand, however, proved a bit tricky. Pikachu smelled her burned flesh and

sneezed.

"You'll never get it open like that," Lance said, watching her toil.

"Just so you know, hearing I can't do something just makes me want to try harder," Lily said.

He approached again and snatched the bottle from her hand easily. Lily looked up in surprise, and that was a mistake. He was much taller than she was, a fact that was easy to forget until he was literally towering over her like he was now. The sight of him so close and so displeased brought back a host of memories, both real and dreamed, and like a phantom pain that knows no physical source and never really goes away, her throat clenched up and she tasted sea water.

But he did not notice her visceral reaction as he set to work soaking bandages in the Super Potion. Before Lily knew what was happening, he was kneeling in front of her and wrapping up her hand. She tried to yank it free, but he held on and put pressure on the blisters. Lily gasped in pain, and he let go.

"What're you doing?" she said, breathing through her teeth to try to stave off the pain in her hand.

A flash of annoyance contorted his angular face for a fleeting second, but he recovered quickly. "Doing what you can't."

"I don't want your help."

If he were anyone else, she might have expected him to roll his eyes like a sullen teenager. Needless to say, he did nothing of the sort. He just grabbed her injured hand by the wrist and resumed the bandaging.

"It doesn't matter what you want. You need my help," he said.

He worked quickly, and soon it was done. Lily retracted her hand and took a few steps back out of a sense of propriety and well-founded fear. This was Lance, not some good samaritan out to help people in need. And yet, that was exactly what he'd done with the Hariyama.

"You're following me," she said. "Why?"

"You would prefer I sit back and watch as those Hariyama beat you to death?"

Lily bared her teeth in anger. "That's not the point. You've been following me this whole time. I'm not stupid, you know."

"When did I ever give you that idea?"

"When you denied it!"

"I never denied it."

"Well, you're not owning up to it. That's basically the same thing."

"No it's not."

"It's a lie of omission. It's the same," Lily insisted. "Ugh, no. I'm not having this conversation with *you*."

She packed up her bag and shouldered it, ready to leave this mad tea party behind once and for all.

"I saved your life," Lance said.

"You killed *so many people*," Lily shot back.

"In my capacity as Champion and protector of the realm." Lance said like the distinction didn't bother him at all. Maybe it didn't.

Lily fantasized about clawing out his stupid broody eyes. "You worked with Team Rocket. At a minimum, you were tacitly condoning mass murder of *innocent* people. It's the same thing."

"How many people have you killed?"

"I---" Lily cut herself off. He was not going to bait her. "That's none of your business."

He said nothing, but he didn't have to. He'd caught her, and they both knew it. Lily looked away, suddenly ashamed. It was different, she'd never colluded with a criminal syndicate or become a terrorist. But she'd still killed. She'd killed many in the Battle of Cinnabar. She thought she'd killed Lance, a man she knew to be evil to the core, and it had haunted her for months.

"You didn't manage to kill me. No need to feel guilty anymore," he said.

It was uncanny how he seemed to be able to read her innermost thoughts so well. Was she truly so transparent? Why did he always know exactly what to say to shake her to the core? Just like when they fought so long ago, even as a dead man he still managed to exude a gravity that would not let go.

"You failed to kill me," Lance went on, "and now I've saved you. Consider us both disappointed."

"I'm sorry doing the right thing is so disappointing to you. Why do it, in that case? Are you just trying to rub it in my face or something? Is this funny to you? What're you even doing out here, really?"

"Thank me," he said.

"...What?"

"I saved your life. Express your gratitude."

"Or what? You'll kill me?"

"Lily."

There it was again, her name in that voice, like some ancient curse never meant to be spoken aloud. What the hell did he want from her? She didn't have the faintest idea. Anything he said was most likely a lie. He was a Titan, after all.

So am I.

But that's different. I'm different.

Was that true? Were they so different? The look in his eyes when he was reunited with Shiny after thinking it dead and lost at sea...

Lily did not realize how long she'd stayed silent as she waded through her muddled thoughts. Lance took a step forward and tried to get her attention.

"Lily," he said again.

"Thank you," she said. "For saving my life and my Pokemon's."

He looked mildly surprised to hear that, and again she wondered what on earth he was playing at. Against her better judgment, she was still here talking to him, this man who had held the world hostage and tried to kill her with everything he had.

"What do you want, Lance?" she asked, suddenly very tired. "Because I don't think you're here to kill me after all that."

He regarded her like one might a poisonous snake, cautiously intrigued and with supreme mistrust. "You named yourself my killer, and now you occupy my seat in the Pokemon League. I have every reason to kill you."

"You would've done it that first night in the woods if that was true. I'm still kinda new to this, but I know this much: Titans lie."

He grinned, a dashing expression that fit with the image of the duplicitous villain Lily had cultivated in her memories of him. "But you don't, is that it? You're...not like me. That's what you said to me that day."

Lily crossed her arms, not liking where this was going. "No, I'm not like you. I've never lied to you."

"What makes you think I have?"

What?

What is he talking about?

Her surprise must have shown on her face (of course it did), and like a jungle cat cornering its prey, Lance waited for her to bolt first and instigate the chase. Sadly, Lily had never been as clever with people as she was with her work.

"You can't expect me to believe that," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Not after everything you've done."

"What you believe makes no difference. You're a woman of science, aren't you? You can't ignore facts right in front of you."

Lily had a bad feeling about where he was going with this. "And what facts're those?"

"That you have no idea where even to begin looking for Mewtwo, let alone how to track it down."

"And I suppose you do?"

"I've lived here in the wilds for months training up a new team of Pokemon. I know every corner of this valley."

"Like you knew about the Hariyama?" Lily said, hating how inferior he was making her feel.

"Of course."

"Just come out and say it, then," Lily said.

"Say it?"

"What you're really after. In case you forgot, we're not on good

terms, you and me. Why should I believe you're here for any reason that isn't selfish or could lead to a lot of people getting hurt?"

"Believe what you want. It doesn't change the fact that I'm your best and only shot at locating Mewtwo without dying along the way."

Lily was so frustrated she could have screamed. "That's not good enough, and you know it. Why are you so interested in finding Mewtwo? Tell me the truth, Lance."

The way he looked at her sometimes made her feel like she was speaking a foreign language. What was so hard about the truth?

"You just said you didn't lie to me before," Lily pressed. "So just tell me what's really going on here. What are you after?"

"I have never been one to ignore a source of power," Lance said slowly, like he was taking his time with the words he chose. "Curiosity... I imagine you can understand the sentiment."

More than he knew, though she had no intention of admitting it. Curiosity had been what had drawn Lily to Mewtwo's plight. The challenge, the light at the end of the tunnel, it was her nicotine draw. Like all habits and obsessions, this one had a tempering agent in her innate compassion for a fellow living creature. Compassion and curiosity converged in this case, but what of the Silver Wing? She had no excuse for that but self-preservation. And to think that her research could lead to the discovery of a legendary Pokemon, a creature of myth and fable---it was a thought that had crossed her mind more than once even after she escaped that harrowing experience with Team Rocket.

Even now, with Lance himself, that same curiosity gnawed and swelled and itched. How had he survived? How had he pulled himself back up after falling farther than anyone ever had? How had he found her? What was it about him that made him magnetic? For all Lance's past misdeeds, Lily could not deny that she had not been able to get him out of her mind all these months. Even lost and presumed dead, he remained alive in her dreams and thoughts, in the shadows at twilight, in the silence of her drafty chambers once Ash had left and taken the light and laughter with him. Without Ash, Lance's ghost had become impossible to drown out.

"I can navigate this valley safely and find Mewtwo," Lance said, oblivious to her internal struggle.

"Why?" she asked, unable to keep the quaver from her voice but no longer caring. She had to know. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because you were right," he said. "You're not like me...but you could be."

No, she wanted to scream at him. *I could never be like you.* Her hand ached where Ampharos's static had burned her, and she clutched it to her chest and wished she was stronger, wished she didn't feel like

crying all of a sudden, wished she could be far from here with Ash. But Ash wasn't here. There was only Lance and her and the Dragons. Just like the last time.

And just like the last time, she could beat him. If she believed nothing else, she had to believe in that. After all, after everything, he was now her only hope. And somehow, she got the feeling that she was his.

Chapter 7

The safe house Morty had told Ash about was not so much a house as a conical roof built over the rocky ground near the mountainside.

"Uh," Ash said. "Is that...?"

"Home sweet home," Morty said with false cheer as he approached the roof. It was made of old weathered wood lacquered black with tar and packed with clay to keep moisture and the cold air out.

Out of where? Ash wondered. The thing only came up to his chest. How the hell were they even supposed to get in there?

The storm was raging fiercely, and the winds howled and pelted Ash with sleet and snow. Pikachu squeaked angrily as he struggled to stay grounded. Gengar and Mismagius floated over Ash's shoulders, impervious to the weather and curious about this place.

"This way," Morty said, still cradling Banette in his arms.

Ash shielded his face from the winds and followed Morty on shaky legs. His knee was throbbing and wet with blood. After the trip here jumping against the wind, it pained him greatly and it was all he could do to stay upright on it. Morty felt around the squat roof and found a hidden latch that he hauled open. The wind rattled it on its hinges, and Morty held it with both hands so it would not snap right off.

"Get inside!" he shouted to be heard over the storm.

Gengar and Mismagius were eager to get inside. Maybe something had died in there and they wanted to dance over the remains. It wouldn't be the first time. The drop into whatever this place was looked long and dark and suspiciously like a cave.

"Goddamnit," Ash grumbled as he braced himself on the edge. Pikachu clung to his pant leg, not wanting to be left behind.

"What?" Morty said.

"I'm going!" Ash said, figuring that complaining about a cave in this weather with his injury would be pushing it just a little.

So he went. Gengar and Mismagius guided him down the hatch, their combined Aura giving him a soft landing. He was surprised to find the drop was a good twenty feet with no ladder leading back up. What was this, some dark pit meant to trap unwitting passersby? If he didn't have his Ghosts, he'd be stuck down here for sure.

Speaking of the Ghosts, where had they gone? Gengar and Mismagius disappeared as soon as Ash was safely on the ground, and Pikachu jumped to the ground and shook the frost from his fur. It was gloomy down here, but up ahead around a corner there was a dim light shining. The walls were stone, which only confirmed Ash's sinking suspicion that this was, indeed, a cave. This day just kept

getting better and better.

"Guys?" he called to the Ghosts, limping along down the corridor toward the light. Without Gengar and Mismagius cushioning his steps, he felt the pain in his knee acutely and was forced to lean some of his weight on the wall as he went. "Where'd you go? C'mon, I'm not really in the mood for hide and seek---*shit*!"

Ash fell back against the wall flailing as *something* appeared out of nowhere around the corner and almost hit him in the face. The stench of decay, sour and putrid, was everywhere all of a sudden like Ash had never known before, and something was right in his face inches away leaking coiled black mist. He could practically smell the threat.

Whispers erupted in his head as Gengar and Mismagius descended, drawn to Ash's fear and whatever was causing it. Pikachu was so terrified that he had fallen silent and was frozen in place.

"That's enough," Morty said forcefully.

On command, his Misdreavus dissolved into gas and swooped in to intimidate Gengar and Mismagius. The Ghosts were momentarily distracted by Misdreavus's sudden intervention, and it was enough time to allow whatever the hell had assaulted Ash to pull back. There was no sound, no wind, nothing at all but the odor, creeping and cloying as though it had taken up residence in the back of Ash's throat and was here to stay. He was shaking, he realized, and perspiring. Pain flared in his knee, and he pulled off his hat and wiped his forehead.

"What the hell is that?" he said.

"I'm sorry, I should've warned you," Morty said. "It hasn't accepted its fate yet."

Ash calmed down, and Gengar and Mismagius assumed their corporeal forms around him. Pikachu regained itself and scampered to Ash's arms, shivering. Morty stood a short ways away with Misdreavus and Banette and the thing that had attacked Ash. It hovered in midair, but its crusted brown wings were still and silent as the grave. Dark tendrils of spectral energy curled around it, receding slowly now that it was no longer on the offensive.

"A Ghost," Ash said, recognizing the deep violet Aura shared by all Ghosts and Mediums. "What is that thing?"

"Shedinja," Morty said. "I'm not surprised you don't recognize it. They're not a...common sight among people."

Not welcome, you mean, Ash thought.

Shedinja looked like some sort of Bug, but it didn't buzz or flutter or really even move much beyond its silent hovering next to Morty. Its body was flaky brown, hoary and husk-like, but there was a darkness in its eyes Ash recognized all too well.

"Imago," he said.

Gengar grinned.

"Imago," Gengar echoed all around them.

Shedinja made no sound at all, but the black mist it was leaking shifted like tentacles, wispy and more illusory than solid. They swirled around its head like a halo.

"Yes," Morty said. "Come on, I'll tell you all about it when we get inside. Your knee looks bad."

Ash let Morty help him back up and was grateful to have him to lean on. Gengar skipped along behind them, while Mismagius kept her creepy yellow eyes on Shedinja, which floated just ahead of them. The back of it was cracked, like its body really was a husk of some kind and something had previously crawled out of it. The crack in it was the source of the Ghostly tendrils that swirled around its head, but Ash didn't have a good angle to see into it properly.

"They say if you stare into the crack in Shedinja's husk, it'll steal your soul," Morty said as he led Ash to the end of the short corridor and behind a thick Ursaring skin drape meant to keep the draft out. "Don't worry, it doesn't apply to Mediums like us."

The room behind the thick drape looked much more like the safe house Ash had envisioned. It was wide cave chamber transformed into a living room with an old sofa and rocking chair, a connecting kitchenette with a table, and a cot that was folded up and stored against the wall. A hearth was carved into the wall and full with blackened wood and ashes from whoever had used this place last. More bearskin drapes hung from connecting corridors that led to more rooms. Morty set Ash up on the rocking chair and set aside both their packs. They both shed their warm layers as they adjusted to the warmer temperature compared to the storm outside.

"Lucky us," Ash said, eyeing Shedinja as it hovered completely silent just behind Morty.

"Yes," Morty said, either oblivious to or ignoring Ash's morbid sarcasm. "Gym Leader Bugsy of Azalea Town asked me to take Shedinja when his Nincada evolved into Ninjask. Bugsy's Volucris, of course, but he didn't want to have Shedinja around to worry the townsfolk. Ghosts can be a handful, as you know."

"Plus the whole sucking out your soul thing probably didn't sweeten the deal, I bet," Ash said.

"...Well, yes, there is that."

Morty went to the kitchen to retrieve some clean towels and a bowl of water to clean Ash's wound.

"Ninjask aren't too common here, but in Hoenn a whole swarm evolves every thirteen years. I'm talking thousands upon thousands," he said.

"Lucky thirteen, huh? Why am I not surprised?" Ash said as he

examined the damage to his knee. Mismagius and Morty's Misdreavus were floating around Shedinja, oddly fascinated. Gengar was more interested in Ash's injury and jumped onto his lap to get a better look.

"The locals fear Shedinja. A few Shedinja can easily be left to their own devices in the woods, but a swarm of thousands could eradicate an entire city," Morty went on.

"Why would they do that?" Gengar poked Ash's exposed knee, and Ash tried to swat him away. His hand passed right through Gengar, though, and the Ghost burst out laughing.

"In the wild, Nincada spend most of their lives developing underground. When they emerge after thirteen years and evolve into Ninjask, the discarded shell Ninjask leaves behind can eventually become a Shedinja if the Nincada was buried on sacred land. Shedinja steal souls to fill the husk Ninjask left behind. They want to be whole and living just the same as any other Ghost."

Ash eyed Morty's Shedinja, who was just hovering like a statue and staring at nothing despite Mismagius and Misdreavus's attempts to get a reaction from it. "Shedinja seems a little, uh...out of it."

Morty returned with his supplies and laid everything out on the couch. "Like I said, it hasn't accepted its fate yet. It'll never be whole, and I can't let it go around snatching souls from innocent people."

"Then what're you gonna do?"

Morty looked at Ash like he hadn't been expecting that question. "Exactly what I've been doing. Shedinja can't steal a soul of its own, but since I'm a Medium, it can share mine the same as Misdreavus and Banette do."

The water Morty had retrieved was freezing, and Ash swore when the rag touched his bare skin to clean away the blood.

"Did you expect it to be hot?" Morty said in a slightly higher pitch than his usual droning monotone, a sign of his amusement.

"Guess not," Ash grumbled. He rummaged around in his pack for the small medical kit he'd brought with him and produced a half-empty bottle of Super Potion. "Thanks for the help. This should get me through the night."

Morty took the offered Super Potion, set the bloody rag aside, and handed Ash a clean one so he could apply the healing agent to the wound directly. "I'll get a fire started," he said.

He began piling firewood in the hearth, and Banette was eager to help but unable to lift anything more than the smallest of kindling in his tattered arms. Pikachu sniffed at the discarded rag with Ash's fresh blood soaked into it and wrinkled his nose. Gengar jumped on the opportunity to mess with Pikachu and tried to eat the rag. Pikachu squeaked indignantly and scampered out of the way of Gengar's long rotted tongue. The rag passed right through Gengar, but the

bloodstains on it turned black and dissolved to ashes on Gengar's tongue. The Ghost cackled and patted his shadowy belly like he had just consumed a fabulous feast.

Ash paid his Pokemon little mind as he concentrated on tending to his knee. The Super Potion dulled the pain, a small blessing, but he didn't have enough for the wound to heal completely. He'd have to bandage it and let it heal the old fashioned way unless Morty had some more Potions here somewhere.

Morty released Ninetales, and Ash stopped what he was doing to admire the mystical fox. While not a Ghost, there was something otherworldly about Ninetales. A close relative of Delphox, Ninetales possessed a mysterious kind of pyrokinesis that could hypnotize her quarry into feeling no pain even as Ninetales burned it alive. The way she had hypnotized Rhyperior into submission was a feat Ash doubted many other Pokemon could have accomplished. Just staring at Ninetale's nine billowing tails was making him sleepy and his bones feel heavy. As though she could sense his attention, Ninetales shifted her lurid eyes in a haunted stare as if to say, 'I see you, human,' and Ash quickly looked away.

Morty asked Ninetales to light the hearth, and the elegant fox complied quietly. Pikachu was very excited about feeling a fire's warmth and ran to join Ninetales and Banette next to it. The Ghosts were inevitably drawn to the fire, even Shedinja, and they all drifted around it as though to a tune only they could hear. Only Gengar remained with Ash, grinning up at him like he had a secret.

"Lavaridge Town in Hoenn holds a ceremony every thirteen years where they burn those thousands of Nincada husks before they can resurrect as Shedinja," Morty said as he stared into the flames. Shedinja floated just next to him. "They say you can hear the Ghosts' screams as the husks burn. It's supposed to be a beautiful sound, like a song."

Ash finished bandaging his knee and tested his weight on it. Gengar mimicked his every move, limping around like he had a bum leg, too. "Sounds creepy, if you ask me," Ash said.

"People fear what they do not understand," Morty said. "Instead of feeding the fear, they dress it up and pretend it's something else, something more...acceptable. I'm sure the ceremony is beautiful, but I wonder where all those stranded Ghosts go without husks to possess."

"Back to where they came from, I guess," Ash said.

Morty regarded him askance and smiled softly. "Maybe." He touched Shedinja's crinkled shell, and the dark tendrils of ghastly energy curled around his fingers, touching him back. "Anyway, ready for the grand tour?"

"There's more?" Ash said. "Wait, what even is this place?"

"Agatha's safe house. I thought you knew that."

"Huh? Why would Agatha have a safe house out in the middle of the Silver Mountains?"

"For the same reason you came out here by yourself. Except, she planned ahead a little more than you and had a safe place to sleep."

Ash made a face. "You know, I wanted to come out here and be all caught up in nature."

"Is that what you call what happened with Rhyperior?"

Despite himself, Ash laughed. "Hey, you're different from before. Less, I dunno, gloomy? It's a good thing."

"Or maybe you've gotten gloomier yourself being out here for so long."

"Aw man, you think so?"

Morty smiled. "Come on, I promised you a real bed."

"Hey, you really think I'm gloomy now? Morty!"

Morty led Ash through a bearskin drape on the opposite side of the room. Pikachu, though reluctant to leave the warmth of the fire, ran to catch up to Ash and trotted alongside him. Gengar bounced along after them with Banette in tow, the latter tripping over the too-long rags that covered his feet but adamant about not being left behind.

This was the sleeping quarters, and it was large enough to accommodate two thanks to the trundle bed Morty pulled out from beneath the only other bed in the room. It was made up with sheets and a pillow that looked like they hadn't been used in this lifetime, but Morty hit the pillow and no dust came out. Clean enough.

"Bathroom's back through the kitchen," Morty said as he raised the trundle bed up to a height with his own bed. "Extra blankets in the chest there," he indicated the large wooden chest at the foot of the bed, "and I think that's about it?"

"Yeah, this is great, thanks man," Ash said, moving to sit on the raised trundle bed. After weeks roughing it in the wilderness, this moth-eaten mattress felt like fine goose down. "I could sit here forever."

"Maybe bathe first," Morty said. "I'll get dinner started while you clean up and settle in."

Hours later, Ash was bathed, changed, and warm for the first time in weeks. Not that he cared so much about personal hygiene when he was sleeping under the stars and fending off feral Pokemon stronger than any he'd ever encountered back on the mainland, but still. Even with his busted knee, he felt better than he had in a long while. Snorlax was out of his Pokeball and napping between the fire and the entrance to the living room, blocking out whatever residual draft managed to seep through the Ursaring pelt hanging over the cave opening. Ash had seen to the gash on Snorlax's head earlier, but there

wasn't much to be done. Snorlax had a thick skull, and even a Rhyperior wasn't going to take him down so easily. Blastoise and Venusaur remained in their Pokeballs for want of space, but Ash figured he could rotate between his three heavyset Pokemon tomorrow. Ninetales was curled up on the couch next to Morty, who was reading a book, and Banette sat comfortably in his lap. From Ash's vantage in the old rocking chair, Morty looked like an old man content to spend his days in quiet solitude. Morty felt him staring and looked up.

"Yes, Ash?" he said.

"I think I finally get what they mean about an old soul trapped in a young body," Ash teased.

Morty blinked, not taking the joke. "Ah. You know, Agatha has a lot of books here. You might find one to pass the time while you're recovering?"

Ash chuckled. "Thanks, but I think I'm headin' to bed. I'm beat."

"All right."

Mismagius and Misdreavus were in their corporeal forms watching the fire, innocuously curled up like two sleepy girls to the untrained eye. As soon as the thought passed through Ash's mind, he heard Mismagius's whispers intensify and felt the Ghost's happiness warm him to the core. She smiled up at him and rose from the ground, tattered dress falling beneath.

Gengar had been pretending to sleep on Snorlax's belly, spread-eagle and tongue lolling the way he had seen the big bear sleep so many times in the past. Shedinja hovered over him as though determined to figure out what on earth Gengar hoped to gain from mimicking the sleeping Snorlax. As soon as Mismagius stirred, Gengar perked up and hopped down from Snorlax's tummy, startling Shedinja and causing the undead Bug to zip out of the way a hell of a lot faster than Ash would have guessed it could move. Pikachu yawned and stretched out on the floor by Ash's feet.

"I'm going to stay up for a while," Morty said as Ash steadied himself on the wall to walk himself back to the bedroom.

"Not too late, dear," Ash said.

Morty shot him a look, and Ash laughed. Gengar laughed along with him, never one to pass up a chance to make fun.

"Pleasant dreams, Ash," Morty said.

Ash nodded and limped his way to the bedroom, Pokemon in tow, where he stripped down to boxers and a T-shirt and buried himself under a mountain of woolen blankets. Pikachu hopped under the sheets and curled up under his arm, while Gengar walked around the foot of the bed. Mismagius fluttered around the room.

"You can stay up with Morty if you like, Mismagius," Ash said,

stifling a yawn. "'M not goin' anywhere."

Mismagius looked down at him, but Ash felt his eyes drooping. Pikachu was like a mini heat pad next to him, so he curled up on his side and hugged the little rodent close. He thought of Lily and how nice it would be to hug her close right now. Maybe he'd dream about her. That would be nice.

A chill passed through him, one he recognized as Gengar merging with him to rest for the night, and it was the last thing he felt as his body shut down and his mind drifted off to blissful sleep. And it was very blissful for the longest time, though time is foggy in slumber and irrelevant in dreams. Was he dreaming? He supposed he was. This floating feeling, somewhere between falling and flying, felt real enough in the moment but hazy around the edges. He went with it.

Falling, flying, drifting in a dream, it was pleasant. He smiled and opened his eyes, but it was dark, hard to see. All around were shadows in blues and violets and blacks, all swirling together like watercolor. Water? Yes, that was water rushing somewhere here, somewhere behind him. He turned to find it, only to find that he was in it, or on it. A river was carrying him lazily along, its waters murky with shadows, and when he dipped a hand in, he didn't get wet.

Huh.

His voice echoed in his head as he floated. Weird dream. He lay back and decided to just go with it, dreams made little sense most of the time. But when he rested his head to look up at what should have been the sky, he instead found himself looking at the ground. Crystals bloomed from glossy black rock like wild flowers in as many colors. There was a path, many paths winding around the crystal structures, over hills and mountains, ending at chasms that dropped away into nebulous nothingness. Ash reached a hand up (down?), and the air shimmered in between his fingers. He'd been drunk plenty of times before, but never had he had such vivid visions, weird fantasies born of intoxication. Had he had anything to drink lately? He couldn't remember.

He wiggled his fingers, trying to make sense of the gravity in the place he'd dreamed up in the throes of exhaustion, and the shimmering in between them began to look oddly familiar. Those fingers, whose were they again? Not finger, claws. Come on, *think*.

Laughter filled his head, a familiar sound. No, that wasn't in his head, it was in his mouth. He was laughing. Bright lights and dim lights, stars both near and far, twinkled and flickered like fireflies, alive but not really alive because stars aren't alive and they're not this close. They seemed to laugh back at him. A chill ran down his spine, and he had the sudden feeling like he was forgetting something. What had he forgotten? He tried to think, but the water that wasn't water

filled his ears and he plunged deeper into it. It was the gravity, the gravity was weird here, it wasn't his fault. How could anyone remember a thing in this place? He couldn't even remember falling asleep.

The chill sent a sharp pain up his spine, and he jerked. Then he crashed into something both soft and hard at the same time with the impact of a freight train hitting a wall. His head spun and his teeth rattled in his head, and Ash convulsed. Suddenly, he was awake in bed, all the blankets thrown off him onto the floor. Pikachu was on the floor and curled up in the discarded blankets, sound asleep for some time from the looks of it, and Ash breathed heavily. He blinked rapidly, trying to regain his senses, but it was dark in here.

"What?" Ash gasped.

His skin was clammy, but he wasn't cold. He made a fist and felt a familiar viscous resistance---Gengar's Aura cloak. Had he unconsciously called the Ghost out in battling mode in his sleep? Ash rubbed his eyes and calmed his breathing, and soon he felt Gengar's Aura separate from him and recede back inside, dormant once more. Ash rubbed his eyes and leaned over his crossed legs. Gengar was dormant within him, but Mismagius was haunting the surrounding area outside, searching for any signs of a threat or, better yet, something dead or dying in the vicinity.

"Just a weird dream," Ash said softly.

Something flickered in the corner of his eye, and he came face to face with Banette. The ragdoll Ghost was sitting upright next to Morty, who was sleeping soundly with his back turned to Ash in the other bed. But Banette was wide awake and staring directly at Ash with luminous eyes, unblinking. Ash could not quite explain it, but he felt an uncanny rush of dread as he stared back and recognized that look, he'd seen it many times before on others.

Banette was afraid of him.

Ash got no more sleep that night, so he decided to make coffee and sit by the fire. The sofa was soft and well-worn, but he preferred the wooden rocking chair. The arm rests were smoothed at the ends from years of hands rubbing them. It felt a little bit like home. Shedinja did not sleep, like all Ghosts, but it had been dormant when Ash first joined it by the fire. It stirred, sensing his movement, and drifted closer as if to see him better. Ash rubbed his eyes and rested his head against the high back of the chair. The rocking was soothing, and he had a quilt over his legs to keep him warm as he sipped his coffee.

"Can't sleep either, huh?" he said in jest.

Shedinja just watched him through unblinking eyes, and Ash smiled to himself. Gengar was still dormant within him, and Pikachu was asleep back in the bedroom. Snorlax would sleep all through the

next day if Ash let him, so it was just Ash and Shedinja burning the midnight oil tonight. The chair squeaked as he rocked back and forth.

He could not get that weird dream out of his head. It wasn't even like anything particularly memorable had happened, but the vision had been so strange and fantastical, something he never would have thought he could dream up. Maybe that was the point. Dreams were supposed to be mystifying and absurd, right?

"What do you dream about?" Ash asked.

Shedinja made no sound, and if he closed his eyes, Ash would never have known the Ghost Bug was there at all. But it was there, watching him, and it hovered closer. Curious, Ash reached out a hand to touch it. Shedinja moved very slowly, haltingly, but the moment Ash felt its rough cold carapace brush the tips of his fingers, he smiled. It was solid, real, so different from Gengar and Mismagius and yet just as...other.

"There we go," he said. "Nothin' to be afraid of."

Shedinja allowed the contact, and when Ash got up to refill his coffee, it followed him around like a lost Lillipup, curious about what he was doing, where he was going. If occurred to Ash that Shedinja must not have known many people other than Morty in its life, and human habits would still be very alien to it. That was okay. Gengar had been the same way when Ash had first encountered him as a Haunter.

"C'mon, Shedinja," Ash said. "You wanna help me pick out somethin' to read? Not like I'm getting any more sleep tonight."

Shedinja was content to follow Ash to the bookshelf and watch as he scanned the titles embossed on the spines. Admittedly, Ash wasn't much of a reader, preferring to do something active or social instead of curling up with a book. That was more Gary's style. And the selection here seemed mostly over his head.

"House of Fleur-de-Lis: The Complete Genealogy of Kalosian Royalty; Theories on Ultra Space: The New Frontier; A Photographic Catalogue of the Lakes of Sinnoh..." Ash read off the titles of the dusty old books. "These're all non-fiction. Where's the thriller section?"

Shedinja was trying to help Ash look for a book, but it accomplished little more than simply hovering in place as it shadowy tendrils brushed over the book spines but remained unable to grip them. Ash went to see what it was looking at.

"...Huh. Didn't peg Agatha for a Hercule Poirot fan." A collection of the detective books were packed tightly together, taking up an entire shelf. He opened up a copy of *Murder on the Orient Express*, well-worn like it had been read a hundred times or more. "Murder and intrigue? Who needs sleep?"

Ash showed Shedinja the book, but it did nothing but stare blankly

at it. Undeterred, Ash filled up his coffee mug and headed back to the rocking chair by the fire to pass the time reading, Shedinja not far behind. And pass the time he did. By the time Mismagius drifted back inside after a long stint above ground hunting dead things and Morty rolled out of bed, Ash had almost finished the novel.

"You remind me of her a little, you know," Morty said from the kitchen.

Ash nearly jumped out of the rocking chair. "Crap, I didn't hear you get up." He rubbed his eyes, but found that he wasn't particularly tired even after the meager amount of sleep he'd gotten last night. The book had kept him engrossed to the point that he almost forgot about the lack of sleep. "Wait, I remind you of who?"

"Agatha," Morty clarified as he fiddled with the stove and began pulling food out of the cabinets for breakfast. "That was her favorite chair. She'd sit in it all night reading with a blanket over her lap by the fire."

Ash closed the book and got up to stretch. "Gee, thanks. First time I've reminded anyone of a grumpy old lady."

Gengar stirred from dormancy and rose from Ash's shoulders in a cloud of violet mist. He slowly assumed his corporeal form on the floor and made a show of yawning and stretching his stubby clawed hands over his head. Ash took a moment to look Gengar over, but the Ghost seemed perfectly fine. He caught sight of Mismagius floating around and went to annoy her.

Guess it really was just a dream, Ash thought to himself. He must have been imagining things when he woke up.

Morty was frying up bacon and eggs, and Ash's stomach rumbled appreciatively as their delicious smell filled the room. "You sleep okay?" Morty asked.

Ash went to join him in the kitchen and made another pot of coffee in an attempt to be helpful. "Huh? Oh, I guess."

"You drank a whole pot of coffee and read a book. I take it you didn't sleep much."

He shrugged. "Weird dream."

"A nightmare?"

"No, not really, just..."

"...Just weird," Morty said, pulling out a couple plates to serve the food.

"Yeah," Ash said. "New bed after sleeping on the ground, guess it kinda got to me."

Morty nodded, accepting this, and they brought breakfast and coffee to the small kitchen table. They lapsed into more casual conversation, with Ash particularly interested in hearing about how things were going for Morty at his Gym in Ecruteak City. Pikachu

woke to the sound of voices and climbed onto Ash's lap, where he fed the little rodent some crispy bacon to appease him. Banette also wandered out into the living room, where Gengar tried to rope him into some mischief with the fire, but Banette was not keen on getting too close to the flames. He decided to see what Morty was doing and waddled to the table. Ash peered down at Banette with this eerie feeling like something was going to happen, but Banette seemed perfectly at ease and tugged on Morty's pant leg like a child seeking attention. Morty obliged him and scooped him up to sit on the table.

"Something on your mind, Ash?" Morty asked.

"Huh?" Ash said.

"You're staring at Banette."

"Was I?" Ash quickly looked up and smiled. "He's a cute little guy."

Morty and Banette looked like quite the pair as they stared him down like this was an interrogation and Ash had just been caught in a blatant lie. "No, he's not," Morty said. "He constantly suffers from the unstoppable desire to consume the flesh of children, which means I suffer the same desire vicariously."

Ash's forced smile fell. "I mean, ignoring that bit..."

Morty pushed his cleaned plate away and clasped his fingers together on the table. "Ash, what's on your mind? The truth this time, please."

Ash shifted in his chair, and Pikachu cocked his head cutely as he chewed on the last of Ash's bacon. This was so stupid. Why was he suddenly so nervous? This was *Morty*, a fellow Medium, one of the only people on the planet who had any idea what it was like to be him. Ash had come out here to clear his head, process this new existence in which he was perpetually haunted by Ghosts, and what a stroke of luck to run in to one of the only other people around who could actually understand. After weeks on his own, he was not much closer to the answers he decided he wanted to find when he came out here. Maybe with Morty's help, he'd get there.

"Have you," he began, "I mean, has Banette ever...been afraid of you?"

Ash could see the gears turning in Morty's head behind those vacuous eyes as they flickered between Banette and him. "Banette isn't afraid of any human. No Ghost is. Hatred, revenge, spite, these are negative emotions they may feel toward humans, but never fear."

"And you know that for a fact?"

"Fear is for prey," Morty said fluidly. "Ghosts are predators. That's a fact."

Ash swallowed hard. Banette was fiddling with a zipper hidden in his sleeve and seemed totally at ease being around Ash, not at all like last night.

I know what I saw, Ash thought resolutely. He had smelled the fear on Banette.

"I didn't get a lotta sleep last night," Ash said. "And when I woke up from my dream, Banette was on your bed watching me. Afraid. I know that look, Morty."

Morty petted Banette's head gently. "All right," he said at length. "I have no reason not to believe you."

"But you don't," Ash said.

"It isn't that. If what you're saying is true, then something must have happened to cause Banette to be afraid. Something that isn't happening now."

Banette leaned in to Morty's touch and made a horrid grumbling noise that was meant to convey happiness but sent a chill up Ash's spine. *Predator, right.* Morty had a point.

"You're saying something I did or said or whatever must've triggered something, 'cause right now Banette's acting normal," Ash said.

"Precisely. So, what happened?"

"I told you. I woke up, and Banette was just staring at me like he saw a Ghost." Ash winced. "Ah, bad analogy. You get what I mean."

"Maybe not." Morty said nothing further as he continued to observe Ash.

Ash began to fidget and tried to think of something to say. Had Morty even blinked at all since they started talking about this?

"You said you had a strange dream last night," Morty said. "It woke you up."

"Yeah."

"Tell me about it."

"What would my dreams have to do with Banette? We're not connected."

"Even so, I'd like to hear about it if you don't mind sharing."

Ash shook his head. "No, I don't mind. But...there's not really much to tell. It was weird, like, I was floating in outer space or something."

"Darkness, stars, no oxygen?" Morty said.

"Sorta. No, actually, not really. I mean, it was space-y like in the wonky gravity sense, and it was dark, but more like blues and purples, not pitch black. It was like those pictures of galaxies they take with telescopes, you know. And there were stars, but they were close, like I could've reached them if I tried, I think." Ash remembered the way that place looked vividly. "They laughed at me."

"The stars laughed at you?"

Ash frowned. "It was a weird-ass dream, okay?"

"I'm just trying to get the details straight. Tell me more."

"There wasn't much else, except... There was a river. I was floating

on a river, but it wasn't like a normal river. It wasn't wet, just cold, and I think I was looking up at the ground instead of the sky. Weird gravity. You know, space-y."

"And then you woke up?" Morty said.

"Yeah..."

"Ash? Something else?"

Ash was staring at his hands. "Gengar's Aura," he said softly. "It was cloaking me like when we fight. But Gengar was dormant. I can't access Aura when he's like that."

Morty thought about this. "I see."

When he said nothing further, Ash said, "That's all you have to say?"

"Should I say more? From what you've said, your dream must have disturbed you on a deeply emotional level, and Gengar responded to that. You have a very strong bond with Gengar, I've told you before."

"Yeah, I remember. Back on Cinnabar Island."

Morty nodded. "It's only gotten stronger since then, which is normal. My guess is you tapped in to Gengar's power while sleeping, which is what woke you up and also disturbed Banette. Ghosts can sense hostility. I'm sure that's what you registered as fear."

Ash rested his chin on his hand. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"Don't worry about it, Ash. We all have bad dreams now and then, even Ghosts." Morty smiled politely and got up to clear the dishes.

Ash got up, too. "Hey, don't sweat it. I'll clean up. You made breakfast."

"Oh, thank you."

Ash transported all the dishes to the kitchen sink and ran the hot water. He waited until the basin was halfway full so he could soak the dishes and start scrubbing. Pikachu hopped up onto the counter wanting to help.

"It's okay, Pika," Ash said. "Go play with the others. Just don't wake up Snorlax, okay?"

Snorlax was still dead to the world sleeping on his back by the entrance to the safe house, and Ash wanted to get him back in his Pokeball before he woke up because the first and only thing Snorlax would want then was enough food to feed a small village. For that, Ash would have to venture outside and search for food, which he wanted to put off for another couple of days while his knee was healing.

Pikachu squeaked happily and jumped down to the floor. Ash watched him scamper off to hang out with Gengar and the others. Morty was right, there was no use in dwelling on something as silly as a dream. Ash wasn't superstitious, and he was no Clairvoyant; his dreams did not have hidden meanings beyond his subconscious acting

up. Tonight he would sleep better, and soon he'd be ready to get back outside with his Pokemon. Satisfied, Ash returned to his work ready to wash and grabbed a dish soaking in the basin.

The water was a murky abyss, not clear and soapy like it had been just a moment ago, and two baleful red lights opened up in the dark depths and stared back at him like burning eyes. It happened so fast, and Ash reacted instinctively before he could process any coherent thought, he swore and yanked his hands out of the water. Pain stung his hand where he'd cut it on a knife in his struggle, and he nearly tripped backing away from the sink.

Gengar and Mismagius, sensing the spike of adrenaline and fright in him, were immediately at his side and searching for signs of danger.

"Ash? Is everything all right?" Morty called from the living room.

He sounded like he was speaking underwater. Blood pounded in Ash's ears as his heart ran away from him and his whole body shook. He clutched his bleeding hand to his chest, red eyes wide as they dared to peek back at the sink. Mismagius thrummed with concern and thinly veiled hostility as she searched for any sign of an enemy, but there was none. Gengar was on the countertop looking down at the water basin, searching for something that wasn't there. Ash approached cautiously.

But there was nothing amiss. The water in the sink was clear and bubbly with soap, a little pink from his blood. His hand was cut pretty badly and would need to be bandaged.

"Ash?" Morty tried again, getting up from the sofa.

"It's nothing, just cut myself," Ash managed, sounding cheerful.

It's nothing.

There was nothing here, that much was true. Ash could feel Mismagius's heavy disappointment over the lack of danger and death in the vicinity after such a reaction from Ash. The Ghost floated toward him and merged, tired from her exploring adventure during the night. She settled within him, dormant, and would rest for at least a few hours to replenish her energy. Gengar was still looking at the sink water, but he looked to Ash when he approached.

"Just a buncha dirty dishes," Ash said.

Gengar frowned dramatically, and Ash felt the heat of simmering anger pass from Gengar to him. He grabbed a towel from the rack by the sink and pressed it to his bleeding hand, wondering how he would wash everything with a wounded hand. He'd have to wait until the bleeding stopped, he supposed.

Gengar sensed his thoughts and opened his mouth wide. Before Ash could stop him, Gengar swallowed his hand at the wrist. Nothing happened, of course, and Gengar passed right through him, but when

Ash pulled the rag from his hand, the bloody stains in it and on his skin turned black and dissolved to fine ashes. The gash in his hand was raw and swollen, but it was no longer bleeding.

"Oh. That's...convenient," Ash said. "Thanks, buddy."

Gengar grinned devilishly. He would have to be careful, but Ash could wash the dishes now without worrying about bleeding all over them. It would do. He reached for a dish in the sink once more, but he hesitated.

Were those...eyes? It happened so fast that he couldn't be sure. But even so, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, an itchy feeling on the back of his neck. The water was back to normal, nothing peering at him through it. Still, the memory stayed with him.

I'm seeing things. Didn't get enough sleep last night.

That was it, he told himself. He began to scrub the dishes without further incident, and soon he forgot all about it. Gengar tried to help, but he could not pick anything up and pulsed with heavy depression over this injustice, which made Ash laugh. Encouraged, Gengar jumped into the water and made it splash with the help of his Night Shade, soaking Ash's shirt.

"Hey! You want me to scrub you, too? You could probably use a bath," Ash teased as he churned the water with his hand and made it soapier.

Gengar cackled as his gaseous body swirled in the water.

Morty gave Ash a Potion to help speed along the healing in his knee later that day and guessed it would need another day before Ash would walk normally again. They thus spent the day reading, chatting about anything that Ash could think of (Morty was not much of a talker, but Ash was doggedly persistent when it came to socializing), and hanging out with their Pokemon. Shedinja was opening up a little more and even let Ash steal a proper look at the crack in its back.

"It's just a black hole," Ash said, a little disappointed. "What's the big deal?"

Morty smiled. "To us, yes. We see Shedinja and we're not affected because it's a reflection of us."

"Right, Imago, I know."

"If a non-Medium were to look upon it, they'd see something...else."

Ash ignored the pang of trepidation on the back of his neck as he remembered the illusion in the sink water he may or may not have actually seen. Gengar, who was playing the charades game with Banette rather unsuccessfully, stopped abruptly and alighted on Ash, feeling his trepidation clearly.

Red eyes, Ash thought as Gengar watched him. *Like mine.*

Like those other eyes, too.

"Here, this should help you sleep," Morty said, pouring Ash a cup of tea.

"Thanks." Ash accepted the tea and drained the cup. He really needed a good night's sleep tonight.

"I think I'll head to bed, too," Morty said.

Blastoise was resting by the fire in his shell, snoozing, but he poked his head out when Ash got up and gave him a goodnight pat. The crack in Blastoise's shell was healing slowly, but he would be good as new soon enough.

"Get some rest, buddy," he whispered to the overgrown turtle.

Ash was in bed ten minutes later with Pikachu under his arm and Gengar doing toe touches on his chest. Banette sat on his rear on Morty's bed watching this ritual like he could not decide whether turn up his nose or get up and start doing toe touches, too. Ash poked Gengar in the tummy and he dissipated into a cloud of violet gas, laughing maniacally.

"Gengar's energetic as always," Morty said as he flipped the lights slipped into bed.

The room was plunged into darkness save for Gengar's and Banette's glowing red eyes. Ninetales was curled up at the foot of Morty's bed under a blanket of her nine fluffy tales and undoubtedly keeping Morty warm. Ash sort of wished he had a fluffy fire fox to keep him warm.

"Never a dull moment," Ash said, reaching for Gengar.

Mismagius typically preferred to keep her own hours, lying dormant only when necessary and almost never at the same time as Gengar for safety reasons, whereas Gengar liked to keep Ash's schedule, as if he were human, too, or wanted to be. Most things Gengar did were in the pursuit of appearing human, often to hilarious or terrifying extremes that made him ironically inhuman. Now, Gengar receded within Ash to "sleep" for the night.

"Goodnight, Ash," Morty said.

"Let's hope so," Ash said.

He settled onto his pillow, focused on his breathing, and soon drifted off. Sleep came on blessedly heavy tonight, like a thick woolen veil over his eyes that seemed to press him deep into the lumpy mattress. He tried to move into a better position, but his limbs were sluggish and clumsy, slow to obey. He opened his eyes, but it was not the rock ceiling of the cave he saw; he was back in the weird dream from the previous night with no sense of how much time had passed since he'd fallen asleep.

Unlike last time, he was not floating in the dream river of shadows, but firmly on the ground. Except the ground was upside-down, and he was on his back looking up at a mountain peak.

"What the hell?" he said.

His voice was muffled in this place, like being underwater, and it echoed softly into oblivion. The ground was firm, stone he supposed, gravelly, and sharp crystals grew directly out of it in pinks and blues and yellows. Ash managed to sit up, and his bangs rose off his forehead as though he were upside-down. He touched the nearest crystal, a bright white, and it pulsed a hazy violet on contact.

"This again," Ash said, noting the spectral violet Aura that coated his hands. It was the same as when he merged with his Ghosts to fight, but he wasn't fighting, he was dreaming. "Gengar?" There was no reaction. He could feel Gengar's dormant presence deep within him, but it didn't stir. Could this be some kind of shared dream? What did Ghosts dream about if they did not sleep?

Whispers, many voices, reached his ears from above, or perhaps below, and he got to his feet. Looking up, he was staring at a vast mountain made of the same dark stone as everything in this place. Veins of colorful crystal streamed down its side like so many rivers, frozen in time, beautiful. Not far from where Ash had woken, a shadowy river flowed over the edge of his small island and rose bizarrely into the sky as a cascading waterfall. The stars, closer than any stars in the waking world, twinkled like lighthouse beacons, floating in the strange undulating gravity of this place. The voices came from the stars, he realized.

"Hello!" Ash called.

His voice echoed faintly, absorbed by this place. It was hard to move around, like he weighed twice as much as he did normally, and it took an inordinate amount of energy just to make it to the river's edge. He dipped his hand in it, and it came away dry. Just like the last time. Shadows swirled around his finger and dripped from them like water.

"What is this place?"

Soft giggling reached his ears, and he looked up. The closest of the stars seemed to be drifting toward him, and Ash stared, transfixed.

"Who's there?"

"Who..."

The voice sounded neither male nor female, and it seemed to come from everywhere at once. Ash recognized this feeling instantly.

"You're a Ghost," he said, watching the closest star as it slowly floated closer.

It did not look like any Ghost he recognized, though. None of the stars did. They were simply bright misty lights, formless. As it drew closer, Ash felt a chill he had not felt before.

"Imago," he tried again, the sudden urge to reach out to this wandering spirit strong.

The star spirit was close, its gaseous body, if it could even be called a body, smoking like morning fog. It had no shape, no discernible features, but it giggled shyly and rolled nearer. Ash felt the strange fog brush his fingers, cool to the touch, but the pleasant rush lasted only a moment. Blinding pain erupted in his hand and shot up his arm, and before he could even cry out, the bright fog was swirling up his arm, sucking him in, eating him.

"No!" Ash cried out, but it came out a garbled mess as his knees gave out and he rolled to the edge of the island.

His arm felt like it was being peeled with a carving knife, and try as he might to get away, the fog surrounded him, growing in size. The giggles grew louder, crazed laughter, and the whispers all around him turned harsh and sinister. Ash made out a single word in the cacophony, felt it like he felt the searing agony in his arm.

"Mine."

Ash screamed and squeezed his eyes shut. He had no way to fight back in a dream except to wake up.

Wake up!

But his body would not stir, and the pain inched up his arm to his shoulder like fire slowly eating him alive. This was a dream, so how could this pain be real? How could any of this be real? It wasn't real.

But Ash was real. Gritting his teeth, he tore at the fog with his other hand, clawing at it the way he would in a real fight with Gengar and Mismagius lending him their power. He pawed at the fog, tore at it over and over, but the pain only intensified. He began to see black spots as his mind slowly slipped into a deeper level of unconsciousness, anything to escape the pain. With an agonized scream, Ash tore at the fog one last time and put all his remaining strength into it, hoping against hope that he'd just wake up and be out of this nightmare.

A shriek echoed his, and suddenly the burning agony in his arm receded. The fog cloaking his arm dissipated explosively, expelled, and the spirit or whatever it was within it screeched as though mortally wounded. Ash was on his rear, his knees having given out, and he clutched his abused arm to his chest. There was not a mark on it, and yet he shook with the remnants of phantom pain. The Aura that had cloaked him previously had thinned and manifested itself independently of him in an amorphous violet-black cloud that surrounded the white star fog and smothered it. The spirit's wailing was muffled and soon snuffed out as the black cloud consumed it, leaving no trace behind.

Ash, breathing hard, stared in shock at the dark cloud that descended toward him, fearful and hopeful. "G-Gengar?" he said in a tinny voice.

The dark cloud assumed a roughly humanoid shape Ash recognized as Gengar's shape, except it wasn't quite right. It was connected to him like Gengar was, there was no mistaking it, but this creature, this Ghost was something...other. Red eyes Ash recognized swiveled to see him better, and a familiar Cheshire grin revealed rotted teeth. But the Ghost's arms and legs were not fully formed, fading into the ether as though they grew out of this dream place. But most disturbing of all was the third eye on the Ghost's forehead, wide and black and reflecting a face that wasn't Ash's.

Mesmerized, Ash stared deeply into the third eye, unsure what he was seeing or if he was really seeing anything at all. Was this even real?

"Ash!" Morty's voice called out. His face reflected in the Ghost's third eye was looking down on Ash like he didn't really see him. "Ash, wake up!"

Ash clutched his ears and closed his eyes. "Stop, just stop!"

He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't *understand*, and all he wanted to do was wake up, leave this madness behind him. He sagged to his side and rolled off the edge of the island, and he fell up toward the mountain, but he didn't care, he just wanted this to be over.

"Ash!" Morty shouted to him again.

The Gengar that wasn't really Gengar flew after Ash and wrapped his smoky arms around him, and when Ash opened his eyes all he could see was that third eye, Morty staring back at him and calling out his name. A terrible cold passed through him, and suddenly Ash was falling fast and hard, and he landed on something soft. The impact scared him so badly that he jerked violently and would have fallen again, but strong hands held him in place.

"Ash, calm down!" Morty said, his voice strained as he struggled to hold Ash down on the bed.

"Morty," Ash said, breathing heavily. "Morty? What?"

"You're awake," Morty said, almost a question. "Thank god."

Ash blinked as his vision adjusted to the dark room. He was indeed back in the bedroom on his trundle cot. Mismagius, sensing Ash's distress, had returned from her midnight wanderings and hovered in the corner on the other side of the room, while Misdreavus, Ninetales, and Banette looked on from Morty's bed. They kept very still, and Banette's luminous red eyes were focused on Ash the same way they had been last night. Even Pikachu was on the floor near Mismagius, his ears flat on his back and his dark eyes wide, silent.

They're afraid, Ash thought, horrified. *They're afraid of me.*

"They're not afraid of you," Morty said, and Ash realized he'd voiced his thoughts aloud. "They're afraid of him."

Morty pointed to the foot of Ash's bed where Gengar, roused from

his dormant state, sat half-formed. Except he wasn't quite Gengar, but the version Ash had seen in his dream.

"Gengar," Ash said, sitting up. "What...?"

Gengar assumed his corporeal form, but as before, his arms and legs dissipated into shadows like he might melt into the darkness at any moment. A third eye stared back at Ash from Gengar's forehead, and within the dark pupil danced visions of nebulous blues and purples and magentas, waterfalls that fell toward the heavens, and foggy stars wandering the vast expanse in search of prey.

"That's my dream," Ash said, unable to look away.

Gengar rose up, and Ash realized the Ghost was larger than he had been before, much larger. Nearby, Banette hissed and his hidden shadow talons scratched against his tattered sleeves. Morty backed away toward his bed and positioned his body in between Banette and Gengar.

"Ash," Morty said, channeling his infinite calm even under the circumstances. "Listen to me very carefully. I need you to release it."

"Release what? What's wrong with Gengar?" Ash demanded.

"That's not Gengar," Morty said. "That's Mega Gengar. I have no idea how, but you've been Mega Evolving Gengar in your dreams."

"I... *What*?"

Mega Gengar grinned wolfishly and looked around the room. Ninetales was on high alert as she followed Mega Gengar's every move. Only Morty's presence kept her calm, but possibly not for much longer. Mega Gengar's three eyes alighted on the fire fox and his tongue snaked out. Ninetales growled in warning and stood up to her full height.

"Ash!" Morty said, less calm than before. "Release the Mega Evolution *now*."

"I-I don't know how! I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"Just calm Mega Gengar down. You can do it."

Ash had no idea what Morty was on about. He'd never used Mega Evolution before and never expected to. He had heard of the phenomenon and about others who could trigger it, sure, but he'd never heard of any Mediums achieving it. Ghosts were different, and Ash knew next to nothing about Mega Evolution, anyway. And yet, here he was. Unprepared and caught off guard, Ash moved on instinct and crawled toward Mega Gengar.

"Hey, buddy," he said, reaching a hand out. "It's okay, you can stop. That's Morty, remember? He's our friend."

Mega Gengar licked his shadowy lips, and Ash felt a crippling tremor of emotion pass through him with the force of a hurricane wind. The hostility and bloodlust Mega Gengar channeled was unlike anything he'd ever felt before from either of his Ghosts, and for a split

second, he had the overwhelming desire to dig his fingers into Morty's eyeballs and mash them to a pulp. The desire was so vivid that he saw it like a vision behind his eyes, felt the pulpy soft flesh under his fingernails. Struggling, Ash made a grab for Mega Gengar, and his hand passed through the Ghost's body. The contact drew Mega Gengar's attention to him, and all three eyes were now fixated on Ash. The third eye blinked, and the reflection of the dream world faded to black.

"That's right," Ash said, breathing through gritted teeth. "The dream's over. You saved me in there, remember? I'm okay now."

Mega Gengar's whispers in his head were so loud that Ash could hardly hear himself talk or think. Something he said must have gotten through to Mega Gengar, though, because before Ash's eyes, the Ghost shrank as half of his body mass rose off him in smoking tendrils and disappeared into nothing. The third eye on his forehead closed and receded until it was no longer visible, and soon Gengar stood at the foot of the bed back to his old self. Red eyes blinked up at Ash, and he got a tickle as Gengar's curiosity and confusion ran up his arms to the back of his neck.

Ash released the breath he'd been holding, and Gengar looked around. He spotted Pikachu and Mismagius and happily danced toward them like nothing was amiss. Mismagius did not seem to mind now that Gengar was back to his old self, but Pikachu scampered quickly to Ash's side on the bed and chittered, still agitated. Ash petted the little Electric rodent, drawing some small strength from it.

"It's okay, Pika. It's okay now," he said, exhausted.

"Ash," Morty said. "I think you better tell me exactly what's going on."

Ash rubbed his eyes. "Search me. One minute I was having that weird dream again, and the next... Mega Evolution? Are you kidding me?"

Morty was silent a moment. Gengar was pestering Mismagius in some game or other like he hadn't just Mega Evolved and saved Ash in his dream from...*whatever* that was.

"I'm not kidding," Morty said. "Mega Gengar... I've only ever heard stories of it. I never thought I would see one with my own eyes. Now that I have, I'm not sure that's a good thing."

Ash frowned. "Why not?"

"Because," Morty said, "I've never felt fear quite like this before."

Ash hugged Pikachu closer, suddenly cold. Gengar burst out laughing all of a sudden for no reason, a common occurrence. But Ash could not help the spike of dread that stabbed him in the gut at the sound of that laughter, and he wondered what Gengar found so funny.

"I have to take a piss," Ash said, blurting out the first excuse he

could think of get out of this claustrophobic room.

He set Pikachu down and slipped off the bed, heading for the door.

"Ash," Morty called to him. "I really need you to tell me about that dream. We have to figure out what's going on with you."

"Yeah, later," Ash said. "Just gimme a minute."

He all but stumbled out of the room and wandered through the living area to the bathroom. This part of the cave safe house had a natural hot spring that took up a third of the space and was likely the reason Agatha or whoever had built this safe house chose this particular cave. A brass tub sat next to the hot spring and was connected to it via a drainage valve. A latrine acted as the toilet without the option of an underground sewage system, and a brass basin had been bolted to the stone wall to act as the sink, also fed from the hot spring. A polished mirror, the only one in the safe house, was bolted to the wall above the sink.

Ash went to the sink and rested his weight against it, eyes closed as he tried to think straight and calm his racing pulse. Mega Evolution? With Gengar? And that dream, the thing that attacked him... What was it? Gengar---Mega Gengar---had saved him from it, awakened from his dormant state and somehow transformed. Ghosts were incredible beings, but Ash had never heard of a power to enter dreams as though they were real. Was this the power of Mega Evolution? And how the hell had it happened to him? He wasn't even trying to do it. He didn't even know the first thing about it.

Mismagius and Pikachu were afraid, he thought, sick to his stomach. *What's happening to me?*

Morty was right. Ghosts feared very little, certainly nothing Ash had ever encountered. Even in battles against strong enemy Pokemon with type advantages, of which there were few, Ash's Ghosts had never been truly afraid. But they sure as hell were now.

Frustrated, Ash filled the sink with warm water and splashed his face. *Get it together, dude.*

He reached for the towel on the rack and dried himself off, relishing in the small measure of comfort the washing gave him. He caught his reflection in the mirror, but his muddled thoughts and sleep-addled brain made him slow to register that that was not his reflection he was looking at in the mirror.

Noxious red eyes stared back at him, wide with sight and runny in the smoky shadows.

"I see you."

Ash screamed, and the mirror cracked.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

This place was...cold. Cold, yes, that was the word for this sensation, the absence of heat. Heat was all he had known for as long as he could remember. Heat and darkness. Now, cold and bright. So bright. There was something falling from the sky, like ash, but it was white and soft and dissolved on contact. And it was cold, so cold. The light of the sun reflecting off the substance was blinding, but it didn't stick to the ground. Only to the tall volcanoes to the east. No, not volcanoes. They were not hollow, and they were not hot. There were many things in this world he did not recognize, things he had never seen, things with names he did not know. But he knew his own name.

Mewtwo, he thought. *The only name I have ever known.*

Cold and bright and pain, that was what he felt out here as far north as he had been able to fly, as far away from that ruined place as possible. There were no humans here---once, yes, but not anymore. There were others like him, though. Not *like* him, but not human, either. They had names, too. Creatures with bushy fur in whites and browns and blacks sleeping in their caves to get away from the falling cold. Others swam in the water pools, shadows under the surface, their skin scaly and slippery. Still others could fly, like him, but they had feathers and wings and soared through the sky. He didn't know their names, but he knew they were Pokemon, creatures that were not human. Nor were they like him, though. And they knew it, too.

Mewtwo made slow progress after he had landed here to climb out of the crater he had opened up in the ground. He had used considerable power to make the volcano on Cinnabar Island erupt and then again to fly all the way out here, and he needed rest. Shelter. Somewhere to hide away and recover. The pain in his tattered shoulder where his arm had rotted away was elemental but not life-threatening. It was the rot in his skull that was more worrisome, and the remains of the poisonous illness that had ravaged his mind and body. The Creator had given him the cure to this sickness, stopped its progression, but he had not reversed the damage. Mewtwo had killed him before he got the chance.

A life for a life, he had told the daughter of Dragons when she tried to stop him.

Mewtwo's life had been used to support all of Cinnabar. Now, all of Cinnabar paid the price. It was fair. It was done. Mewtwo was free, and he was never going back to that hot, dark, lonely place.

The other Pokemon avoided him. Maybe they smelled his blight,

but none tried to take advantage. They simply retreated from his path. But when Mewtwo followed them with his third eye, he saw their caves, their hovels, their homes where they took shelter, and he knew he would have to do as they did. The cold was unbearable in his current weakened state.

He staggered and stumbled in the dirt and landed at the edge of the nearest water pool. It was huge and shimmering with a thin layer of cold crust, and when Mewtwo touched it, it cracked. So delicate, so cold. A creature of the water spooked and darted into the depths, but not before Mewtwo read the creature's thoughts.

Ice. The cold crust. It was called ice. And the water was a lake, and the creature was a Barboach. She lived in the muddy shallows to hide from predators.

Me, Mewtwo thought. Why else would Barboach fear him so?

He drank from the lake, then rose and looked around. There was a gathering of many tall dark figures, alive but not Pokemon. When he approached them, the feathered Pokemon nesting in them told Mewtwo their names: trees. This was a forest, and the birds were Spearow. They lived in the sheltering trees until they were old and strong enough to evolve. Mewtwo wandered into the forest, and more Pokemon scurried to safety whenever they detected him coming. But he read their thoughts, too, and learned.

The falling cold was snow, the volcanoes that weren't hollow were mountains, and this place was a valley where humans had not trespassed this far north for centuries. It would suit Mewtwo's purposes, then. If he never saw another human again, it would be too soon. For now, survival was his only priority.

Deep in the forest, he found a deep tree well under raised gnarled roots where the snow could not get in, and he peered within. Something fast darted out, surprising him, and Mewtwo staggered back. The creatures were long and covered in brown fur, and they screeched at Mewtwo in anger as they bit and scratched to drive him away. Reacting on instinct, Mewtwo channeled a bit of his remaining power and forcefully pushed the creatures away. They went flying and slammed into the surrounding brush. Bones snapped, and there was a bit of scuffling.

Furret, that was their name. A couple had survived the assault and scampered away into the underbrush. Others were not so lucky. Mewtwo doubled over in pain at the discharge of his telekinetic powers. If he didn't rest soon, he would pass out and succumb to the elements. The tree hollow was his for the taking now. But first...

Prey, he thought as he scooped up one of the dead Furret by a bushy tail. The creature's spine was shattered, and one of his eyes had popped and oozed a bloody discharge. Mewtwo dragged her back to

the tree hollow, slipped inside, and laid back against the thick roots.

It was quiet, and beneath the roots it was not bright at all. Not total darkness like his tank in the volcano, but shadowy. Mewtwo stared at the Furret carcass, feeling the tickle of hunger. The Creator had always fed Mewtwo intravenously, but instinct showed him another way. Bringing the whole carcass to his mouth, he sank tiny fangs into the fur and meat and bone and ripped. Blood spilled on his bent legs, still hot, and it tasted like nothing. Nothing but strength. Mewtwo forced himself to chew and swallow, feeling the sustenance settle in his belly and give him warmth.

When only Furret's head remained, Mewtwo tore at the soft flesh and cracked the skull to get at the mushy brain matter hidden within. He dipped a stubby finger in the tissue and saw a vision of the Furret's last moments, the family she had protected in this tree hollow, now dead or left for dead in the wilds thanks to Mewtwo. Survival, that was all Furret had thought of in those last moments.

Like me. Are we the same?

The other Pokemon feared him, ran from him. Humans had created him, but they feared him, too. Neither Pokemon nor human, but something else.

An aberration.

That was what the Creator had called him. A monster.

"Mewtwo's not the monster here. You are."

That was what she had said, that daughter of Dragons, just before Mewtwo escaped Mt. Cinnabar. Mewtwo crushed the remains of Furret's skull in his hand. If the Creator was a monster, what did that make him, the monster's creation? One thing was certain. Whatever he was, he would survive. He was free now, and he would grow stronger. He would never go back to the dark place where not even the sun's rays could reach him. He would never be used by humans again.

And if any of them tried to hunt him down, then he would show them just what kind of predator they had unleashed on the world.

She was a heavy sleeper, Lily. Somehow, Lance had imagined she would be. Maybe because he was a light sleeper, easily awakened at even the insinuation of sound. Lance had just returned from refilling his water skin at the nearby lake where Lapras had dived deep to drive a school of fat Finneon to the surface for Charizard and Kommo-o to snap up. Between the two of them, they wolfed down almost half the school. Lance stomped the heel of his boot down on the head of a Finneon flopping on the grassy shore. Brittle fish bones cracked and crunched underfoot, and dark blood seeped into the grass. He picked the foot-long carcass up by its elegant butterfly tail and took it back to camp, where Lily was still dreaming away.

Her Pokemon, however, were wide awake and watching Lance's

every move. Dodrio, a species immune to the sway of a Titan, was especially prickly in her observation of him as he sat down to roast the Finneon whole on a makeshift spit over the campfire for breakfast. The bird always had one head awake and alert, the perfect guard to watch over a defenseless sleeping girl. Lily's Dragonair, whom she had nicknamed Tiny of all the ludicrous things, was also keeping watch while she and her Pikachu slept.

Not that it mattered much to Lance. He had nothing to gain from harming sleeping defenseless women. But he supposed he could not fault Lily for being cautious; he wouldn't trust him either if he were in her place. Only time could change that, if at all, and out here, time and solitude were abundant. Lance had nothing but time.

It was a beautiful morning, as most mornings in northern Johto were. The sun was just breaching the horizon and lit up the lake like a huge glittering Water Stone. Lapras was happily swimming and fishing around for kelp or skipping Surskit to break her fast, humming as she enjoyed the quiet morning. She saw him watching and sang to him, beckoning him to join her in the water to play. She was very playful, he had discovered in their long months together. The young usually were. It was not so long ago that Lapras, too, had distrusted Lance and helped him purely out of necessity. And now look at her. Lance had not exerted his forceful control over the Ferry Pokemon for months, and he likely would never have to again. Time, and a little kindness freely given, could change everything.

The smell of Finneon's roasting flesh carried on the light morning breeze and roused Pikachu from slumber. She stood up on her hind legs, ears and cleft tail erect, nose twitching as she inhaled the heavenly smell of food. Lance was a little surprised when she wandered toward the campfire, but she stopped a healthy distance from him.

"Hungry?" he asked the tiny rodent.

Pikachu made no sound at all as she simply sniffed the air, leery and ready to bolt at a moment's notice. Lance wondered why Lily even had a Pikachu on her team. It was a fairly mediocre Pokemon in terms of raw power, and this one wasn't even fully evolved. What had she called Pikachu?

"...ChuChu," he said, remembering the inane nickname.

Pikachu perked up, wary but obviously confused hearing him use her nickname. What was the point of nicknaming Pokemon? They already had names. No sense in adding a second one. Lance only had one name. He briefly entertained the thought of Lily dubbing him with some irreverent nickname, but swiftly put the thought out of his mind.

Ridiculous.

Pikachu refused to come any closer even though Lance could see her hunger. The smell was getting to him, too, and his stomach rumbled. But this tiny rodent did not trust him, and no matter how hungry she was, she would not come closer. Unless he could offer something to assuage Pikachu's suspicions. Charm would not work on Pokemon as it had worked on the native Fairchild islanders. Something simpler then. Something he didn't have to fake. He released the pink Dragonair from her Pokeball.

Pikachu squeaked, ready for a fight, but when she recognized the Pokemon Lily obnoxiously referred to as 'Shiny,' she drooped her ears and waddled near. Dragonair was happy to see Lance and slithered close, but when she saw Pikachu, she hummed and lowered her head to greet the little rodent. Lance observed in silence, and slowly, Pikachu let down her guard enough to touch noses with Dragonair. So trusting.

I could command Dragonair to crush you without a second thought.

And Dragonair would do it. She would not disobey him. It would be so easy. But Lance gave no command and merely watched as Pikachu sat back on her haunches and scratched behind her long ear, vulnerable but at ease even so close to him now that Dragonair was about.

You're not worth the effort, Lance thought as he started disdainfully at Pikachu.

Pikachu blinked up at him, alert like she had heard his thoughts, but she didn't scamper off or spark. Big black eyes lingered on his profile, almost uncomfortable, and Lance busied himself tending to the roasting fish. It was ready to eat, and he made short work of stripping off the meat with a hunting knife. Pikachu watched him with those misty dark eyes as he sucked fish grease from his fingers, her sensitive nose twitching. For a couple seconds, Lance and Pikachu waged a staring contest over the small plate of cooked fish he guarded close to his chest.

Without a word, Lance pinched a fat bit of fish meat between his fingers and held it out for Pikachu over his lap. Pikachu squeaked, the smell mouthwatering as it wafted on the breeze, and she inched closer. She made halting progress, pausing with ears and tail erect, those big eyes wide and wary of Lance. Dragonair had slithered off toward the lake to join Lapras, leaving no buffer between them. Lance said nothing as the unspoken challenge hung in the air.

Pikachu was just a foot away now, and he may have been able to kick her if he was quick about it. He didn't. The little rodent's static-laden fur stood on end as she wrinkled her nose and watched him, unblinking, waiting for the slightest hint of trickery.

What do you see when you look at me? he wondered.

Lance's master, the Blackthorn Elder, had taught him that Dragons and their descendants could see a Titan's aura; it was how they recognized the blood. Sight and smell and sound, it all boiled down to instincts and memory. Pokemon in general could discern Tamers from non-Tamers, and they naturally gravitated toward Tamers who shared their elemental affinity. But when Pikachu saw him, what did she see? A stranger? A nemesis? Or something more familiar? Perhaps something she saw in Lily, too?

"ChuChu?" Lily called.

Pikachu bolted at the sound of Lily's voice, and Lance stuffed the bit of fish she hadn't eaten into his mouth. It had grown cold, but he swallowed it all the same and went back to the rest of his meal. Soon enough, Lily was up and joined him by the campfire, lured by the smell of roasted fish.

"Eat," Lance said.

She blinked at him, those amber eyes wide and curious. "You didn't have to get food for me," she said.

"I know that."

Wordlessly, she helped herself to some fish, sharing with Pikachu. "Thank you," she said softly. "That was nice of you."

Nice? He peered at her, but she was too busy eating. It wasn't nice, it was a matter of survival. If she didn't eat, she would be weak and lethargic, a liability. But she chose not to see his actions that way. Humans never ceased to amaze him, truly. No matter how good he became at emulating social cues, pretending at empathy, honing his performance, the genuine article revealed on a whim was not something he could ever emulate. Whatever piece that made her feel was missing in him, carved out of him in that kill shack as he watched his father beg for his life on his knees. His deficiency didn't bother him since he'd learned how to live with it, but he noticed it quite a bit more around her. Maybe it was this place, the solitude. Or maybe it was simply her.

Lily misinterpreted his silence. "Um, I mean, I just meant that I appreciate it," she said awkwardly.

Lance remained silent as she watched her, and she grew increasingly more uncomfortable. He could have laughed. He was saying nothing, and yet she was beginning to squirm. How could she live like that? So attuned to the feelings of others? He could not bear it. She'd stopped eating.

"Look, if I said something weird, then I didn't mean it, okay?"

He smirked. "Relax. It's only breakfast."

She opened her mouth to respond to that, but surprisingly decided to bite her tongue. She nodded and went back to eating.

You've been through this before.

He could ask her, he supposed. Find out what she was thinking, why she struggled the way she did, who had pointed it out to her before and left enough of an impression to make it stick. But he didn't much care about any of that. Out here, it was just the two of them. No need to bring in anyone else.

"That reminds me," she said. "I meant to ask you about the locals. You know their language. Why?"

"I live here."

She frowned. "Yeah, but you're not from here."

"I've spent many months living here. It would be disgraceful for me not to learn the local customs and language after all that time."

She blinked, and he could almost see the thoughts flitting behind those amber eyes. "That's... I didn't think about it like that before. That's kind of wise."

"You, on the other hand, started a brawl when you showed up here," Lance said.

Lily blushed. "It was a misunderstanding. ChuChu didn't stay hidden, and the locals took it the wrong way. It was just a mistake."

"Your mistake," Lance said evenly. "You were clearly aware of their custom to keep Pokemon out of sight indoors, as you just said, and you had a responsibility to adhere to it. You chose not to."

That Pikachu was never in her Pokeball, Lance had observed. No wonder the locals had taken such offense at Lily's disrespect of their customs. To release a Pokemon within any dwelling was nothing short of hostile, a tradition still adhered to as far south as Mahogany Town.

"I didn't mean," Lily started. But she trailed off, unsure what to say in her own defense.

She's not a tactless cretin, at least, he thought. *I doubt she's ever offended anyone intentionally in her life.*

"Now you know," Lance said.

She looked genuinely abashed. "I... You're right. I messed up. I didn't even think about it, but that's no excuse."

"An Elite Four cannot afford to be culturally insensitive," Lance said. "You're an ambassador. People look to you as a facilitator, not a symbol of ignorant entitlement."

Her blush only intensified, and he realized that he'd just acknowledged her position. His old position. It was hers now. But he'd come to terms with that long ago and simply returned to his food before it got cold. It was only an empty title. He was still him, and she was still...something entirely other.

"You're surprisingly thoughtful," she said.

He wondered if this was her attempt to make fun of him, but she looked very earnest. He was convinced, in that moment, that no matter how hard she tried, Lily could never tell a lie with a straight

face, not even to him. She was probably the worst Titan who had ever lived.

And yet, she was the one here with him. Against all odds, somehow, their paths had crossed again. If he had much of a sense of humor, maybe he would have laughed at the irony.

"I've had years of practice," he said.

Lily looked at him strangely then, and he knew he must have said something off.

Maybe I'm a little out of practice.

"I wanted to ask you," she said, haltingly. "They called me something, the locals, I mean. I think you were there when they said it. I can't really remember the word... What was it? Bala-something?"

"*Balaur*," Lance said. "It means Dragon in their language. They use it interchangeably to mean Dragon or Titan. To them, there's no distinction."

"Oh... I guess that makes sense."

They lapsed into silence, which was just fine with Lance, as he had food left on his plate to finish, but it soon became apparent that Lily was feeling awkward again. She did not like silences.

"So, this is weird, huh?" she said at length.

Lance had finished his food by then and set down his plate. "Weird?"

"I mean, you know, us being here. Together. You and me. Not trying to kill each other. Weird."

"We have a deal," Lance said. "It's as simple as that."

"I'm not sure it is."

"Is that so?"

"Okay, seriously," she said, setting down her food to give him her full attention. "I can accept that you have no intention of killing me based on everything that's happened up until now. And I think we both know my word at least is trustworthy. I'm kind of the worst Titan ever in that regard."

At that, he did crack a smile. "True."

"What I want to know is what's really in it for you? Why do you want to find Mewtwo? If you'd just be honest with me, I promise I won't jump to conclusions, okay?"

"I already told you."

She shook her head. "I know I'm gullible and naive compared to most people, but I'm not totally oblivious. After what happened with Lugia, you can't honestly expect me to believe that you don't have an ulterior motive here."

"I wasn't lying to you," he said carefully. "I already explained that."

"But you weren't telling me the whole truth, either. That's the same thing."

"The truth."

"Yes, the *truth*."

Pikachu was chewing on some fish, but she paused, long ears swiveling, as she detected the rising animosity between the two humans. Ampharos looked up from his grazing near the lake, also detecting the rising tensions.

"Forget it," Lily said when he didn't answer. "You'll never change, and I'm the fool for thinking you could." She got up.

"Why should I be the one to change?" he asked before she could stalk off.

"I'm sorry?" she said, incredulous.

"If it wasn't for me, you would be dead several times over by now. It seems to me that the one who needs to change is you."

"I'm not the one who tried to destroy the world," Lily hissed.

"You didn't unleash a creature on the world with the power to bring about the apocalypse?" Lance challenged. "My mistake. I guess we can go home and forget about Mewtwo, then."

She stared at him, aghast. "That's different. I didn't mean..."

Lance got up and towered over her at his full height. She looked so small like this, unsure of herself. He hated that look on her. "That excuse again. You didn't *mean*. You don't mean for very much, do you? You lack conviction, in your actions and in yourself. Titans lie, you say. The fact that you believe that's all we are, that it defines us, shows how oblivious you truly are. You'll never be ready to face Mewtwo or me or anything else standing in your way as long as you refuse to face *yourself*."

"Stop it," she said. "There's no 'we.' I'm not like you."

"Yes, you've made that abundantly clear, and now I'm beginning to see your point. You can't even Mega Evolve your Ampharos."

Their Pokemon were drawn to their raised voices. The two Dragonair poked their heads out of the water, and Kommo-o looked up from the mess of bloody fish meat and bones he'd been hunched over, his golden scales clanging like chimes with every twitch.

"I don't--- What does Amphy have to do with anything?" Lily said.

"He has everything to do with it. Try it if you don't believe me. But I can see that our last parting hasn't had the effect on you that it should have. Or perhaps, you're denying it outright."

Something in her shifted then as his words struck a nerve, and she bared her sharp teeth in anger. "Maybe I don't care about any of that. I don't want to be like you or Clair or any of you. I want to be like *me*."

"*You* are not good enough," he said scathingly.

Lance rarely lost his temper, but she made it so easy, just like the last time they'd crossed paths on Shamouti Island. Why didn't she understand? If she were anybody else she would not have been worth

even the dirt under his boot.

She blinked up at him, her anger faltering as his words touched a chord somewhere and wounded her deeply. "That's not what you said the last time."

"Last time, you faced me without shame," he said. "Or maybe you really are a better liar than you think."

She wasn't even trying to hide the hurt. And it should have felt good, justified, this incontrovertible proof that his suspicions had been right: he'd left an indelible mark on her, just as she had marked him. All those months, a part of her had never let him die even when Clair, the Elder, all the rest had been happy to consign him and his memory to an early grave. He almost regretted his words. A lie seldom cut as deeply as the truth.

"We'll set out within the hour. Pack your things," he said before showing her his back.

When they hiked, it was mostly in silence. Lance chose Kommo-o to walk with him, the Dragon's clanging scales a warning to any feral Pokemon in the vicinity to stay away. There were few Pokemon in these parts willing to engage a Kommo-o, Lance had explained.

"What about the ones who *are* willing?" Lily asked as she walked a sensible distance from him alongside Pikachu and Dodrio.

"If we encounter any, you'll know."

They lapsed into silence again. Lance, she discovered right away, was either very comfortable with long silences or had the patience to wait her out through them until she caved first. When Lily had been out here with only her Pokemon, she hadn't minded the silence. There had been no one to talk to but them, but they couldn't exactly hold a conversation. With Lance, he simply chose not to engage. Lily did everything she could think of distract herself from the chasm between them. She asked questions as a start.

"Why don't we just fly on Mega Charizard? He can carry both of us, and the sooner we find Mewtwo, the sooner we can be done with this."

"Numbers," he said. "Ours are better on the ground."

Lily frowned. The skies were clear, no sign of wild Flyers. He seemed to anticipate her next question.

"Just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they can't see us."

What could be dangerous enough that Mega Charizard couldn't handle it?

But then she remembered the Hariyama from before and how she'd barely escaped with her life. Lance had not tried to engage them, either, instead focusing on escaping.

Huh.

She'd never pegged him as the cautious type, not with his

reputation. And yet, he was still alive despite his reputation.

Balaur, that was what they called him. What they called her. Even out here in the middle of nowhere far from everything and everyone she knew, there was no escaping what they were.

Is that what I'm doing? Trying to escape?

"Last time, you faced me without shame."

She hugged herself, suddenly cold.

When she ran out of questions, Lily began taking notes and capturing sketches of the surrounding environment and the Pokemon she observed. For all the danger the Hariyama and Staraptor had posed, there were plenty of Pokemon here that seemed perfectly happy to coexist peacefully. She and Lance were making their way along a river fed by a tiered waterfall, the biggest one Lily had ever seen. It was as five or six stories tall and wide enough to create a cascading terrace on each level. Deep lagoons, highly oxygenated from the constant frothing waters, teemed with life.

Yanma skated on the river's surface, chasing each other in a flighty mating dance. Flashy Lumineon snatched them under, their colorful fins glowing with every color of the rainbow when the sunlight hit them. Herds of Sawsbuck and Stantler drank at the water's edge, and a pack of Arcanine and Growlithe drank a short ways downstream from them. It was as if at the water's edge, enemy lines were erased in a silent truce. The canines wrestled each other playfully under their mothers' watchful eyes. Ursaring stood at the crests of the waterfalls on all fours, mouths agape as they caught Wishiwashi leaping upriver to spawn. Lily stopped to watch and began to sketch one of the Ursaring. She had a pair of Teddiursa cubs playing in the shallows as they waited for Mom to return with lunch. Lance said nothing when she paused to capture the image, but he stopped to watch the Pokemon, too.

Lily finished her sketch and thought about capturing the image of the playful Growlithe and Arcanine next, but Lance caught her eye. He was watching the cataracts with a look on his face Lily had never seen on him before, almost peaceful. Kommo-o had gone to drink from the river, and he was alone standing there in his furs and wool, the shock of red hair a bright splash of color against the browns and blues and greens of the surrounding environment. Before she knew what she was doing, Lily took a rough sketch of his profile. She was no professional by any stretch of the imagination, but it was a hobby from childhood and she had enough talent to capture a discernible image. He had a strong jaw, a proud set to his shoulders, and in silence if she ignored everything she knew about him, she could see what it was about his image that inspired others to obey. Some people had an air about them, an invisible power felt bone-deep, and she was suddenly

reminded of the wild Dragonite she'd encountered on the Seafoam Islands the day she'd met her Dragonair, then still a Dratini. It was the same feeling, a natural awe, intelligent and even serene, quietly powerful and enviably beautiful.

"You're not like me...but you could be."

No, Lily thought. *I doubt I could ever be like you.*

For a fleeting moment, as she looked at him like this, at peace, the thought made her a little sad.

"I'm finished," she said.

He turned and the feeling was gone as those dark eyes, unforgiving as stone, watched her unflinchingly. "Let's keep going."

She nodded, and they set off again, taking their lunch on the road. That night, when they made camp, they finished the remains of the Finneon Lance had roasted for breakfast earlier that morning, mostly in silence. The silence was getting to her, but she didn't know what to say to him that wouldn't lead his cold dismissal and her bitter resentment. It seemed like there was nothing left to say. He'd made it pretty clear how little he thought of her, and she couldn't get it out of her head.

I'm not ashamed of anything, she thought stubbornly as she lay awake in her sleeping bag with Pikachu tucked under her arm. But Lance seemed to think differently, even challenging her that she could not Mega Evolve Ampharos.

Not that she'd ever tried, of course, but she knew the mechanics. All it took was a blood oath and a compatible Pokemon. Ampharos was compatible with her, and in the many months since she'd traded baby Pichu for him from Ethan, the two of them had become close. Ampharos was easy-going and liked to lounge around, take things slow. That was just fine for Lily, as he made a great companion when she had to do a lot of reading or wait around for test results or sit at her desk for long hours writing out reports. Pikachu tended toward restlessness, always wanting attention. With Ampharos, simply being near each other was enough, and the Light Pokemon was usually content. In battle, he had proven himself reliable and strong, easily as strong as Dragonair and Dodrio, even, and against the wild Hariyama he'd proven his loyalty by protecting her at the risk of his life. If that wasn't a good relationship, then Lily did not know what was.

Lance's back was to her in his own sleeping bag, and he hadn't stirred in a long time. Charizard was up and keeping watch somewhere out of sight, and Dodrio was keeping her own watch over Lily.

It can't be that hard, Lily reasoned. Maybe learning how to master it would take time and patience, but the mere execution? It was just mechanical, a process, like any other equation. She bit her lip and

slowly inched out of her sleeping bag, careful not to disturb Pikachu.

Lance did not stir as she pulled on her fur-lined boots and grabbed her pack. Dodrio's middle head was awake and keeping watch, and she nipped at Lily's shirt. Lily petted her and whispered quietly to pacify her so she wouldn't follow or make a ruckus, and she slinked off into the shadows.

They had camped near another lake, but they'd left the woods behind tonight. Lily hiked just far enough that the glass grass of the field around their campsite hid her from immediate sight, and she released Ampharos's Pokeball. The Light Pokemon appeared in a bright flash, and Lily winced, hoping it didn't wake Lance.

"Hey, Amphy," she said, smiling and running her hands down his long neck. "Looks like you're feeling better, huh?"

His wounds were healing quickly thanks to her medical treatment the other day. He leaned into her touch and nuzzled her shoulder affectionately.

"So, I want to try something," Lily said, rifling around her bag for the switchblade Ivy had given her a long time ago. "What do you think, Amphy? Think you can try Mega Evolution?"

Ampharos's tail glowed like a Sun Stone and cast a warm halo of light around them in the grass. Lily opened the switch blade and hesitated before cutting her palm.

What if Lance is right?

Ampharos made a soft mewling sound and watched her with those dark doe eyes, encouraging. Lily smiled up at him. "I'm game if you are."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes so she couldn't see the blood. The blade was sharp, but it still stung badly, and she gasped at the pain. Ampharos's eyes dilated at the smell of her blood, and his fleshy ears fell flat against his head as adrenaline kicked in. Static jumped along his skin.

"Okay, Amphy, are you ready?" Lily said, trying to ignore the sting in her bloody palm.

She lifted her bleeding palm to his shoulder, wincing as the static shocked her, and pressed a bloody handprint to his rubbery flesh. The static sparks bled from bright yellow to a ruddy red as they spread all over Ampharos's body, and Lily held her breath.

But nothing happened. There was no transformation, no magical surge of power, nothing at all. She pulled her hand away, and a runny handprint sparked as Ampharos's static charred the blood.

I don't understand, she wanted to say. *I did everything right.*

Ampharos mewled and nudged her shoulder again, sensing her disappointment. She petted his head with her good hand absently.

"You are not good enough."

Lily's throat clenched, and she hugged Ampharos close.

"Why did he have to say that?" she asked.

Ampharos had no answer for her other than to let her hold on.

"You knew," she said the next morning as he packed his things.

"Knew what?"

Lance wasn't even looking at her. She shoved her bandaged hand in his face, the wrapping stained red with her dried blood.

"That I couldn't Mega Evolve Amphy."

He glanced at her hand and returned to stuffing his sleeping bag in its casing. "Any Titan would have known."

"What's that supposed to mean, anyway? Hey, I'm talking to you."

He got up and looked down at her. She hated when he did that, using his height advantage over her. Normally it didn't bother her with other people. She'd always been quite short even for a woman, but there was a metaphor here that was working against her at every single turn when it came to Lance and they both knew it. Despite the events of the past, she couldn't stand how small she felt in his presence.

"You know what it means," he said. "Stop asking so many questions and start answering them instead."

Lily considered herself to be a rather calm and reasonable person most of the time. But with Lance, she was at her wits' end trying to keep her cool. "I did everything right. But I've never had a reason to try Mega Evolution before."

"That's better."

He made to leave to see to the remains of the campfire, but she grabbed his wrist and held him back.

"Lance," she said, searching his face for something, anything. He gave nothing. "You're trying to tell me something, but I'm not understanding it. So help me understand."

He said nothing, and she wanted to give up. What did it matter what he thought? She'd done just fine without Mega Evolution for this long, and she'd be fine without it from now on, too. But that wasn't the point, no, not when he looked at her like that, so disappointed.

"You're a Titan for true."

Was it a lie? All this time, all these months thinking him dead but unable to forget him, watching as everyone around her celebrated his downfall, all the nights when those words had kept her going. He had no idea what it had meant to her to hear those words at that time, facing him alone and scared and way out of her league when Ash and the others were counting on her. A part of her had known she was marching to her death when she went to Shamouti to buy her friends time. How could she, a no-name scientist, ever hope to challenge the Champion of Kanto and Johto himself? And then, he'd been the one to

give her the strength she needed to get back up and face him. In a way, Lance was the only reason she had walked away the victor of their battle that day.

"If your parents had not fled Blackthorn when you were an infant, you would have been raised as a Titan and learned our ways," Lance said. "That formal opportunity is lost to you now."

"What? That's not really, I mean... What're you saying---"

"I could teach you," he interrupted.

"I..." Lily stared at him, truly at a loss for words. "Teach me?"

"The old ways. Titans were the first Tamers to rule this earth when the Creation Trio made us in their own image millennia ago. Ours is a rich history, a noble legacy of power and control to be proud of."

"Control," Lily said, recalling his cold-blooded confusion over her treatment of Ampharos's wounds. "It's always about control with you, isn't it?"

He frowned. "Control is in our blood."

"Yeah, I've seen it. I'm not a fan."

"You're a Titan. Your blood and the control you exert are what set you so far above all the rest. It's our legacy. It's always been this way."

"Just because things used to be one way in the past doesn't mean they should be like that now. It shouldn't matter that I'm a Titan or that someone else isn't. It doesn't mean I'm better or worse. I make my own choices, and so do you."

A flash of anger darkened Lance's expression, and Lily felt her stomach clench in trepidation. "You're so arrogant," he said.

Lily gaped at him. "*Me*? Is that supposed to be a joke or something? After everything *you've* done?"

Something in him snapped, and he lost his temper. A sharp incisor poked out over his lip as he clenched his jaw, and the sunlight glinted off his high prominent cheekbones in a way that made him look reptilian, animalistic. Nearby, Lily's Dragonair called out, as though he could smell the change in the wind.

"You're denying yourself the knowledge of who you are, where you come from, on the whim of strangers you'll never even meet and who don't even care," Lance said, a razor edge to his tone that had not been there before.

Every word he said hit her like a knife to the gut, and she began to shake with the force of her boiling emotions. "Of course you would write off every other person in the world but yourself," she shot back.

"While you dare to write off an entire race and centuries of history on your misinformed bias because it suits you. That's a level of arrogance I've rarely seen before, least of all from a self-proclaimed woman of science," Lance said.

"You're my only example for how Titans fight! All anybody else

ever says is how much Titans can't be trusted, how we're all hated even by each other. What am I supposed to think? This so-called legacy you keep talking about, all I've ever seen of it is the terror you visited on us all. And you *really* expect me to be proud of that?"

She didn't give him enough time to answer and plowed right on through her tirade.

"You held the world hostage, because why? Because you think you're better than everybody? And you think *I'm* arrogant? Maybe you're really the strongest Titan in the world, I don't know, but you're not a god. No amount of control or power is ever gonna change that. You're just a man making excuses, and if that's something to be proud of, then I definitely don't want any part of it."

Charizard had woken from his nap nearby to stare at the two of them, as had Pikachu and Lily's Dragonair, but none of the Pokemon dared approach. Lily's heart was pounding in her ears and she was sure she must be red in the face with anger. Lance was just inches away looming over her, eyes wide and cloudy as he breathed through his nose on the cusp of lashing out.

"Thank you," he said, "for being so *honest*."

He stalked off toward Charizard, mounted without a word, and took off to the east. Gone.

Lily stumbled backwards and ran into Dragonair, who looped around her and supported her weight and hummed in concern. Pikachu squeaked up at her, confused.

"What just happened?" she said.

He left. He's gone, he's really gone.

Would he come back? Was that the last she would see of him? What about Mewtwo? Lily clung to Dragonair, shaking as her head swam.

"He's wrong," she said to her Pokemon. "He's wrong about everything. He's the villain, not me."

He wasn't wrong about Amphy.

Hot tears of frustration and anger blurred her eyes, and she wiped them furiously and regained her balance. The lake near their camp was crystal clear and still, a mirror of the blue sky above. She went to the shore and dunked her hands in the chilly water. Her bandaged hand bled a little, clouding the water a faint pink, and her reflection warped. She splashed the cold water on her face, but it didn't help calm the heated anger and frustration and hurt.

What was she doing? Why was she even out here with Lance? How stupid could she be to even consider teaming up for any purpose whatsoever? As if he would ever do anything to help her, of all people. Dragonair slithered up beside her and stared down at their shared reflection.

"You could stay with me."

Lily's breath hitched in her throat as she remembered his offer, so long ago, when he recognized a piece of himself in her.

"Stay, and you'll understand a little of what I mean."

What was there to understand? Control, manipulation, whatever it was that made him so strong, she didn't want it. She didn't need it. Dragonair would stay by her side with or without Lance, as he was now.

The water rippled their reflections, warping them to something else like a funhouse mirror, and Lily stared back at eyes narrower than hers, cheek bones more pointed than hers, hands with long fingers made to rip, at one moment strange and the next familiar as the water moved.

Is that really me?

A cloud had passed over the sun, casting a shadow over the world below and turning the lake's depths a dark violet. Her reflection faded to a silhouette next to Dragonair's. She wished Ash were here. He would tell her that no matter what, she would always be her. No one could tell her who or what to be but her.

"You are not good enough."

"What if...I'm wrong?" she asked, her voice quavering.

Lily removed the soggy bandage from her cut hand to rinse it off in the water, but stopped short when she saw her reflection staring back up at her. Except for just a moment, it wasn't her reflection at all. Startled, she dropped the bandage in the water, and the image faded.

"Ash?" she said, stunned.

She fished the bandage out of the water, but as the ripples settled, she saw only her own blurry reflection and Dragonair's. Blinking, Lily rubbed her eyes and leaned over the edge of the water, searching for the split-second image she thought she'd seen. There was no trace of it.

"I could've sworn..."

Dragonair nudged her with his scaly nose. Just being around him had a serene and soothing effect that was hard to ignore, and Lily ran her hand down his neck.

"I think I need to clear my head," she said, getting up.

Lance was gone. Maybe he would be back, maybe he wouldn't. Either way, there was no use in continuing on alone until she knew for sure. So she re-bandaged her hand and went for a walk with Dragonair and Pikachu and her sketchbook, trying to keep her mind off things and simply observe. Every few minutes, she would look up at the empty sky, searching, wondering whether whatever was out there could see her even if she couldn't see him.

Lance didn't return until the following morning. He knew that he if

stayed around her a moment longer as they had left things, he would react with force and ruin the tenuous partnership he'd forged between them. Lance had never been the type to carry a temper, having learned prudence and patience from a young age under the Elder's whip.

"It's always about control with you, isn't it?"

He could hear the disappointment in her voice, the exhaustion, like she knew all too well the ways of the world, of him. But she knew nothing. How could she not see? It was so much more than the control she was thinking of. It was him, and it was her. It was everything he'd ever known.

But he would get no answers brooding alone. He'd tried that for the last several months out here, and it had not gotten him anywhere promising. Lily was the most promising thing that had happened since the world left him for dead, she and Mewtwo both. He would not discard either venture so easily, not just yet.

So he returned to their camp and found her finishing her breakfast. He had every intention of ignoring her for now while he collected his thoughts and tried to figure out a way to put their latest spat behind him when she called to him.

"You came back," she said.

"We haven't located Mewtwo yet," he said.

"No, I meant... I meant to say I'm glad you came back," she said with a little more conviction.

He searched her for the lie that would have been there on anyone else. But this was Lily. The only person she could ever lie to was herself.

"We have a long way to go," he said. "Make sure you're ready."

Pikachu looked at him oddly, more curious than wary, and Lance watered his Pokemon by the lake while he waited. Soon enough, they were on their way in a northeasterly direction at a brisk pace. Kommo-o and Dodrio were accompanying them, as usual, and Pikachu was riding on Lily's head licking herself clean. Neither of them spoke as Lance led the way, and the silence under the weight of her gaze on his back was heavy and cold. He rubbed his hands together through the deer skin gloves he wore, searching for warmth, but he found little.

Over the next few days, they followed a river that narrowed to many small streams like the branches of a great tree that spread out the farther north they hiked. The mountains to the west were misty and quiet, watching them from on high over the thick pine forests that coated their bases like a blanket over the folded laps of grey giants. Storms in the mountains descended on the valley, bringing with them a fog that encroached on the valley floor like a slow-marching army.

The temperature dropped the farther north they hiked, and Lance heard thunder far in the distance as they approached a brewing tempest.

He may as well have been alone. Lily mostly lingered a good quarter of a mile behind his faster pace once they set out in the mornings, and he had to stop himself from wandering too far ahead of her. Kommo-o's scales clanged with every step he took, spooking any Pokemon hiding in the grass and sending them scampering off in a fright from the sound they knew in their bones to be a death knell. But even this far ahead, Lance imagined her watching him through the haze of fog that swept by them.

It was foggy that day, he recalled of their clash on Shamouti Island so long ago.

It had rained then, as it threatened to do now, and the island drowned under a falling sky, leaving nothing but a watery grave in the wake of their parting. He could picture it clearly even now, the total annihilation they had wrought between their Pokemon and themselves. If he closed his eyes, he could even still picture her, clear as day, running over the flooded sands, broken and bleeding, and reaching out to him, the last sight he saw before Lugia plummeted him to the abyss.

How can you not understand? he thought as he gazed ahead to the stormy skies. *After all that, how can you still not understand?*

"Why is that the only way you can see the world?"

Lance frowned deeply. Kommo-o growled beside him, sensing his mood, and ended up scaring the daylights out of a family of Patrat and Watchog that had been on high alert watching them pass. The meerkats scampered underground to their dens.

Day after day of silence passed as Lance and Lily retreated further into themselves. They barely spoke, though there was little to say anymore. Sometimes he would catch her watching him like she wanted to say something, but she never quite found the words. Perhaps she wanted to apologize. She struck him as the type who would jump at the chance to reconcile no matter the blow to her pride. But she never did. She only watched him, thinking. To what end, he could not say except that he was sure he seldom left her thoughts, as she seldom left his.

Eventually, Lance and Lily came upon a strange stretch of land that made even Kommo-o tread lightly. Huge stone arches rose from the earth like teeth, tall enough for Lance to walk under and miss touching the tops with his fingertips. He touched a hand to one of the ruddy stone arches and stared in quiet surprise when he realized he was not touching stone at all. They were bones, petrified over the ages, and there were thousands of them.

The arches he emerged from were once the belly of a great beast, its ribs turned to stone with the passage of time and overgrown with glass grass and wild flowers. Great curved bones of all shapes and sizes lay half buried and overrun with weeds. The remains of a huge domed skull with a tree growing through it was now home to a Ninetales and her litter of Vulpix, the walls charred from their play. An ancient Torkoal near as big around as Kommo-o was making his slow way among the bones, chewing on sweet grass and spewing smoke from his shell, oblivious to Lance and his clanging Dragon. Somewhere unseen, Houndour and Houndoom howled to signal to each other, a pack on the hunt or perhaps simply retreating to shelter to avoid the encroaching fog. Lance gazed ahead at the many miles of petrified bones rising out of the ground, refusing to be completely buried.

A graveyard, he surmised. *Forgotten over the centuries.*

He stopped before a particularly large skull. It was intact enough to make out the huge eye sockets, broad forehead, and two enormous looping tusks. One was broken and crumbled to dust, but the other was mostly intact and still sharp.

He hadn't realized how long he'd been standing here staring at the remains when Lily caught up to him and stopped to look. Pikachu squeaked and flattened her ears as she jumped to Dodrio's back, uncomfortable. Even Dodrio's truculent heads were cowed and quiet under the effects of the moribund calm this place engendered. The skull of the dead Pokemon, likely some extinct ancestor to Mamoswine, was one of countless buried here, like they had all come here to be together in death. The mammoth's tusks, once ivory that would surely have been as precious then as it was today, was nothing but a petrified husk of its former glory, a priceless treasure now nothing but an empty shell.

Lily hugged herself and made a sad sound as she looked on at the skull of this forgotten creature that had come here so long ago to die. Perhaps it had walked the same path they had. Perhaps it had been a king among its kind, a formidable beast that roamed this valley unchallenged. Even its bones made Kommo-o and Lily's Dodrio uneasy, two predators in their prime with little to fear in the world.

But like its withered ivory tusks, the beast was nothing but a relic now, bleached bones turned to stone as the world went on without it. Even its name had been lost somewhere in time.

"Maybe you're really the strongest Titan in the world, but you're not a god."

The longer Lance observed the remains of this once magnificent creature, the more he could not bring himself to look away. If he looked away, he would become just one more soul who forgot this

creature, this place and everything that had happened here.

"You're just a man making excuses."

What would it matter? All of this, his life, the memories he carried, the power he had amassed, what would it matter? One day, he too would be nothing but bones, and even his name would be forgotten, just as his coward of a father had been forgotten. Everything he'd done, all that he'd achieved, and all that he had failed, what would any of it ever truly matter?

Lance touched one of the petrified tusks gently, afraid it might crumble to dust.

What if...I'm wrong?

He was not a god, no matter how gifted or graced, and there was only one person in all the world who knew he was still alive.

"Lance," Lily said softly, like it took all her energy just to be heard.

He let his hand fall and turned to look at her. It was strange to hear her say his name after the last few days in the wake of her diatribe against him and their shared heritage. That seemed so long ago now. She wasn't looking at him, but at the skull.

"Is it still open?" she asked.

"Open?"

She looked older, tired and beaten. Or maybe it was just this place, the bones, the ashes. Maybe she felt it too, all these souls reclaimed by the earth, their glory as fleeting as the fog that swept through here on the winter wind.

"Your offer," she said. "To teach me."

Maybe she mourned them, too. What they might have been, what they might have achieved when the world belonged to them. What had been forgotten.

"Yes," he said numbly, like another unseen force had claimed his body and spoke for him. "If you want to know."

"I want to know," she said, turning back to the cracked and crumbling skull. "I want to know everything."

They stayed there as the fog rolled in and the graveyard sank beneath the mists, two sentinels watching over the forgotten souls just for a little while, remembering.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in this latest update! I have not forgotten this fic, and I'm hoping to finish it this summer if all goes well. Thank you to everyone who's been sticking with it and sending me feedback!

Chapter 9

Lance was a good teacher, and somehow, that did not surprise Lily at all. The best mentors are those whose hearts are filled with passion for their subject, not necessarily the ones who know the most. In Lance's case, though, he was both.

They walked ever north, out of the vast elephant graveyard and into the misty moors at steadily rising elevations. The lakes here grew smaller and closer together, like so many puddles that gathered after a hard rain, and they fed into each other over cascading waterfalls and turgid streams. As they hiked, Lance told her about their kind, where they had come from, and why.

"We were created by the original gods millennia before the first Tamers set foot in this world," he said. "They created the universe, and then they created us in their image. Dialga, Palkia, and Giratina---they're the Trinity representing Time, Space, and the Void in between. Many clan Titans still pray to them even now."

"Agatha said something about how Titans weren't created with the rest of the Tamers," Lily recalled from a conversation long ago on Cinnabar Island. "You really believe we're descended from mythical Dragons?"

"It's not about faith. And you of all people should know that myths are merely history few have bothered to remember. It doesn't make them any less true."

She thought of Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres, the legendary birds that had awakened to help her friends in their time of need to stop Lugia. Lily had been as close to Zapdos as she was to Lance now, mystified as she stood toe to toe with something impossible.

"Okay, I can accept that," she relented. "So, where are they now? The Trinity, I mean."

"No one knows. If they were Pokemon, as I suspect they were, it's likely they died a long time ago. I haven't found any hint of their continued existence in any of my research. But they did live once, and they left something behind for us."

"They did?"

"The sacred swords," Lance explained. "One for each Titan dynasty. It's said they were forged using the blood of the Trinity, and that they can give their rightful wielders the same powers as the Dragon gods themselves."

Lily wanted to know more about those swords, and Lance obliged her. Evighet was the Eternity blade, forged from Dialga's blood and infused with the power to stop time itself, even in the face of imminent death. Verden was Palkia's sword, maker and breaker of

Worlds with a single cut. And from Giratina's blood came Tomhet, the Hollow sword said to open portals to unseen dimensions. Each of the three great Titan dynasties was bequeathed with a sacred Dragonsteel sword, though now only the Fafnir Dynasty in Unova claimed to still possess its house relic, Evighet. The others were lost, perhaps destroyed over the ages, it was unclear. And even if the Evighet currently residing in the Dragon King Drayden's care in Opelucid City was the genuine article, no one had known how to properly wield it for centuries.

"It's likely a fabrication," Lance said as they stopped to water Dodrio and Kommo-o at a lake so clear Lily had to touch the water's surface to verify that it wasn't just some deep and empty hole in the earth. "I petitioned Drayden many years ago to allow me to examine the sword during a trip to Opelucid City, but he denied my request. I suppose I would have done the same in his position."

"Wait, so the others were lost?" Lily's mind was racing. "Does that mean the Blackthorn Titans had one of the swords once, too? Which one? What happened to it?"

Lance looked at her, and Lily realized she'd asked too many questions in one breath again. She bit her tongue.

"Verden was our sword," he said at length, almost reverent as he lowered his voice and gazed out over the lake. "The Taki Dynasty's progenitor was said to have raised Sinnoh's Corona Mountains out of thin air with a single cleave, joining the two halves of the known world. The blade summoned the mountains from another dimension beyond ours, Palkia's realm, or so the legend goes. To this day, Mt. Coronet's peak is said to be a gateway between our world and another. Many have tried to scale the peak, but it's the highest in the world, and most who've tried have perished, their bodies never recovered."

Lily shivered. *Creepy.* "So much power..."

"Yes. In the Age of Dragons, when all Titans lived together as a single unified clan in Sinnoh before the Purge, power was...on another scale."

His gaze was faraway in the haze of memory, wistful, and Lily wondered what he was seeing. "You talk about it like you remember it. Like...like a past life or something."

Lance's expression softened, and he smiled a little. "I do remember it." He looked at her. "You can, too. It's in our blood, those memories. They live on within us, if you care to listen."

Lily stared, unable to look away when he looked at her like that, more human than she had ever seen him. It reminded her of the way he'd looked when she sketched his profile just after they began traveling together. That seemed like a lifetime ago. "The Old Blood, you mean."

"Yes," he said. "The Old Blood."

And yet, there was much and more he did not know. The Purge, which saw the Titans scattered to the ends of the earth and divide into the three dynasties that existed today more than 3,000 years ago, had no explanation Lance could trace. There were as many theories as there were scales on a Dragonite, from divine retribution for the arrogance of man to natural disasters to power struggles between the Titans and plebs that populated Sinnoh. Whatever the reason, the Titans left Sinnoh forever, Sinnoh's empire saw the rise of pleb Imperators, still the ruling class to this day, and much of the history before that time was lost to bedtime stories and allegories.

Verden, the Taki Dynasty's sacred sword, was also lost. "I've looked for it," he admitted as they shared dinner across a small campfire. "I went to Celestic Town to speak with a famous genealogist, Professor Carolina, who was able to trace my own ancestry back to the time of the Purge. Even she could not say what had become of the Taki Dynasty's house relic. There were rumors of Dragonsteel blades circulating in Hoenn some years ago, but never anything concrete. Fabrications pop up everywhere, making it impossible to know which stories are true. I was going to make the trip personally to investigate anyway, but then Team Rocket came into power."

He trailed off as he stared into the flames, and Lily realized he wasn't going to say any more. She watched the firelight dance across his sharp features, making him appear all the more reptilian in the half light, though all she could think was that in a way, he looked sad. Disappointed, perhaps.

Do you regret it? she wanted to ask him of all that he'd done, all the people and Pokemon he had hurt or killed when he decided to side with Team Rocket. Because for the life of her, hearing just a small part of the knowledge and ardor he carried with him all these years, she could not imagine that he did not regret it every single day of this new life where he'd lost everything. But she could not bring herself to ask him, not when he looked like that under the soft glow of the fire, just a man under the stars, alone out here except for her.

"I'm going to sleep," Lily said, rising and scooping Pikachu up with her, who was already snoozing and didn't stir even when Lily moved her. "Lance?"

Dark eyes flickered up to see her, and she managed a smile.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, meaning it. "I want to know more tomorrow."

"Why did you change your mind?" he asked.

Lily shifted her weight and Pikachu in her arms as she pondered that. In truth, she didn't have an answer for him.

"Could you do it?" Marla had asked her before all this. *"Forgive*

someone who wronged you in the worst way possible?"

Back then, it had been easy to say yes. The one who had wronged her worst of all was dead. Did he want forgiveness? Did she even have the right to give it? Would it change anything? She didn't have the answers, just as she didn't have them standing there among the mists of death and memory in that elephant graveyard with him. Never in all her life had she felt so alone.

And neither, perhaps, had he.

"I'm not sure yet," she said, hugging Pikachu closer to her chest. "But I know I was wrong to refuse your offer before."

He said nothing as he watched her over the flames, and she retreated to her sleeping bag.

She was a fast learner, as he knew she would be. Guileless and naive though she could be, Lily was nothing if not a voracious intellectual able to absorb and process large quantities of information and analyze them with the rigor of a seasoned logician. Lance knew a little of what she did professionally, having researched her history after he had left Fairchild Island, and he had a new understanding of the genius and inspiration it must have taken for her to create the Silver Wing. He only needed to describe a concept once, and she seized upon it and took it apart without prompting.

"So the mark of nid," Lily said as they made camp for the night under the umbrella of a tall oak tree. "It's like the Titans' version of a scarlet letter?"

"In a way," Lance said as he unshouldered his pack and rubbed his sore neck. "There are four cardinal sins worthy of the mark of nid: rape or murder of a fellow Titan, adultery resulting in a forbidden pregnancy, and oath breaking."

"Of a fellow Titan," Lily said. "So everyone else is fair game."

Lance shot her a look, but she was keeping herself busy unpacking her things. "...For the purposes of nid, yes."

"And you said the mark of nid is associated with Giratina," she went on. "It eats the sinners in the afterlife?"

"So the mythology goes," Lance said. "It's an allegory, like all religions and mythologies are."

She looked up at him. "Is it?"

She had that look she got when she was thinking far ahead and far away, a bit of mystery and excitement on the brink of discovery. She bit her lip, a little tell she had when she was trying very hard not to blurt something out carelessly, like she could not contain the multitude of racing thoughts in her head. Her knew her well enough now to know that she would not be able to keep her thoughts to herself in the end.

"You have another theory?" he asked, obliging her curiosity and

maybe his own, too.

"Not a theory, really, more like a hunch. Giratina's not just a Dragon, it's a Ghost. They say Ghosts come from the Ghost Plane. They're not from this world."

Lance stopped what he was doing to give her his full attention. "Go on."

"If Palkia and Dialga and Giratina were Pokemon, then I don't see why they couldn't have been like any other Pokemon we know today. People probably realized that Ghosts came from another plane, and they logically connected Giratina to that." She shrugged. "Maybe it's actually all true. Maybe when we die, our souls go to the Ghost Plane and even become Ghost Pokemon somehow. Not just the niddings, but all of us."

"If you believe in souls," he said, not liking this frivolous line of thought.

"I live with a Medium," she said. "There's a lot I believe now that I didn't before." She looked at him funny. "You should know. Agatha was one of your fellow Elites before..."

"...Before I betrayed her and everyone else," he finished her thought for her.

Lily was so transparent in everything she did and said that there was never any hiding what she felt or thought. She averted her gaze as though ashamed. Ashamed of him? Or ashamed of herself for being here with him? Knowing her, it was both. He braced himself for the questions he knew she wanted to ask, the explanation he knew she wanted. But they never came. She gathered up what little was left of her lunch to pack it away and shouldered her backpack.

"Well, we should get moving," she said.

And so they continued on in silence, and Lance was left to ponder his own thoughts, wondering at the silent strangeness of the world when she wasn't filling it.

It was quite early when Lily heard the desperate cries that she soon realized were not part of her dream. She rubbed her eyes, bleary in the predawn gloom, and got out of her sleeping bag. Dodrio's right head was awake and staring off into the distance where the bleating was coming from, but she didn't seem too preoccupied by it. The Kyukai Valley was full of Pokemon of myriad different species, and their cries and howls and squawks could be heard at all hours of the day and night. One Pokemon's crying was no cause for alarm. But still, it rattled Lily, and she was compelled to investigate. It sounded almost afraid.

Pikachu remained curled up in the sleeping bag, so Lily deigned not to disturb her. Lance was also sleeping a short distance away, but he didn't stir. "Stay here and keep watch, Dody," she commanded the

three-headed dodo. "Tiny and I're gonna go check that out."

She released Dragonair and headed in the direction of the crying. She and Lance had made camp that night at the edge of a thick forest slashed by a wide meandering river they had been following the last couple of days. The higher elevations as they hiked ever north yielded to increasingly rockier terrain and hardy vegetation. Forest trees clustered together like old women huddling for warmth, pines both tall and squat, ancient gnarled oaks, proud birch. Deep crags in the valley floor sank too far to see the bottom, toothless grinning mouths that might swallow anything or anyone careless enough to fall down to the center of the earth. Steam rose from some, and Lily suspected they were vents for subterranean rivers warmed by magma deep below the crust. Some of the lakes they passed were indeed hot springs, more numerous the farther north they went.

The crying was coming from one of the crags, one not leaking steam, and Lily slowly approached with Dragonair. She peered over the edge, but the filmy morning light was yet too faint to make much out. There was a trodden animal path along the lip of the crag that wound down among the boulders, so Lily followed that. She suspected that the crying was from a baby Pokemon of some kind. Perhaps it had fallen down there and gotten stuck, or it was too afraid to climb back up. Dragonair hummed as he slithered along after her, also distressed by the Pokemon's cries, his dark eyes glimmering in the morning light.

"Where are you?" Lily called out, squinting through the shadows. The crying was close now, but she couldn't see a safe way to continue down toward it. The path was too narrow, and rocks had piled up loosely after a recent slide. "Did you fall down there?"

Lily was considering climbing onto Dragonair and floating down when her foot slipped and she lost her balance. The rocks and gravel slid with her, and she only got a gasp of shock out before she went plummeting down. She reached out with her hands, desperate for a handhold, but her fist closed around a shrub growing through a crack in the rock that ripped off under her weight. She landed hard a short ways down, but it felt like she'd fallen much farther in her fright. Her knee throbbed where she landed on it badly, and she fell to her elbow on her side. Rocks and gravel fell down after her, and all she could do was shield her head as best she could until they stopped. A little dusty and a little sore, Lily shook out her hair and blinked. She yelped and scrambled back against the wall of the crag when she saw how precariously close to the edge she had landed, just a couple inches from falling to her doom. Breathing hard, she dared to peer over the precipice. There was nothing but darkness as far down as she could see.

"Holy crap," Lily said, her heart pounding in her ears. "That was way too close."

Above, Dragonair hummed his worry, and Lily squinted to find him. He was a good twenty feet up, and the wall had fallen away with her such that it would be impossible for her to climb back up on her own.

"I'm okay, Tiny!" she called up. "I'm okay..."

She looked around. There wasn't much room to maneuver down here. She was on a ledge, and more hardy brush had found cracks in the rock to force out roots and claim what little sunlight filtered down here. The crying was so loud now that she was sure whatever it was had fallen down here, too, as she did. It was coming from behind the thickest bush, ensconced behind a crooked slab of rock.

"Hey," Lily called, wincing as she kneeled. She'd need to take a look at her knee when she got out of here. "I'm here, I'm not gonna hurt you."

She approached the bush and slowly began to pull away the branches. The little creature's red eyes glowed as they reflected light, wide with fear.

"Lily!" Lance shouted from up above. "Are you down there?"

Lily stared at the creature trembling in the brush. "Yeah, I'm here! I heard crying, but I fell when I came to investigate."

He said something she couldn't understand, and then, "Charizard can't fit down there, but Dragonair can pull you out."

Lily looked up and saw Lance peering over the edge of the crag next to her Dragonair looking a little sleep-tousled. "Just a minute! I have to help this little guy!"

"What? What is it?" Lance said, impatient. "Just get out of there. The ground isn't stable, and I'm not coming down there after you."

Lily pushed back the brush again. "He's a baby Larvitar! I'm gonna bring him up!" She showed the frightened Larvitar her hand. "It's okay, little guy. I'm here to help you, okay?"

Larvitar was too spooked to trust her intentions and snapped at her fingers. She barely pulled away in time to avoid losing a few to the green dino's powerful jaws. Small as they were, Larvitar were known for their tempers and could be vicious when provoked, even the young ones. Their parents, however, were the true terror.

"Where's your mom, anyway?" Lily wondered aloud. "I kind of don't want to know..."

Larvitar bleated again. He was quite small, maybe just a few weeks old.

"Lily, did you hear me? Get out of there!" Lance said.

"In a minute, I just have to grab Larvitar!" she shouted back up to be heard.

"Leave him! He's calling to his parents. Eventually, they'll be back for him, and we don't want to be here when they get here."

"No way, he's stuck! I'm helping him!" To Larvitar she said, "Come on, Larvitar. It's okay, see? I'm not gonna hurt you."

But poor Larvitar was too traumatized by his tumble down the crag. Lily had no idea how long he'd been down here separated from his parents without food and water. No wonder he was lashing out.

"What's taking so long?" Lance said.

"He's scared," Lily said. "He doesn't trust me."

Dragonair hummed again, his worry plain to hear. The sound made Larvitar huddle down and whimper.

"Then make him trust you," Lance said. "He's a Dragon descendant. You can reach him."

Despite the situation, Lily glared up at Lance. The sun was rising fast, and she had to shield her eyes to make out his silhouette, dark against the light of day beyond. "No way! I told you, I don't want to control Pokemon. They're not mindless slaves!"

He said something that sounded like a curse, though she couldn't make it out. His impatience was plain to hear when he spoke next. "Foolish woman, this is no time for your holier-than-thou tripe. Or would you prefer I leave you down there?"

"I'm not leaving without Larvitar!" Lily insisted.

"Then you have a choice to make. You told me you wanted to know everything, and this is part of it. It's part of you."

"I don't want to control Larvitar against his will. There has to be another way!"

He made a sound of exasperation. "Enough! How can you be so blind after all this time? It's not about control, it's a connection. *That* is what separates a true Titan from all the rest, the power to connect. It's your ability to connect with Larvitar that will make him trust you like he would his own kind."

Lily set her jaw so hard her teeth ached. Larvitar was still looking at her with wide red eyes, glassy with fear and mistrust. All she wanted to do was help him, but fear had a way of making beasts and men deaf to reason.

"If I could convince you not to be afraid, then..."

Lily had vowed never to use the power to control the way Lance had used it to control Ash's Charizard. But this was different, and her reasons were purely selfless here. If she could just make Larvitar see that, then maybe they could get out of this dark hole together.

"It's not about control, it's a connection."

Lily reached out her hand again, wary of Larvitar's jaws. He watched her suspiciously, pupils dilated with adrenaline and fear. "Larvitar," she said softly. "I'm getting you out of here, so stay calm.

Trust me."

She remembered the feeling of controlling Dragons, like reaching into their heart and grasping it in her fist, squeezing and twisting. She felt that same pull now, but then the strangest thing happened, and she thought she could feel Larvitar reaching out to her, too. It was the most uncanny sensation, like a phantom limb tingling on the edge of her consciousness, a part of her that she hadn't used for a very long time and had forgotten how. When she touched Larvitar with her true hand, he let her. His scaly nose was cold to the touch, and his breaths were shallow and slight, but he pressed his nose into her palm like Dragonair would often do as a show of affection. There was no resistance, no squirming like worms under her skin when she'd wrenched control of Ash's Charizard from Lance so long ago. There was just relief, warmth, and trust.

Her cheeks were wet, and she blinked away tears that she hadn't realized she'd shed. Larvitar slowly waddled out from his little cave to be near her, and she scooped him up in her arms like a child. He was shaking, cold and tired and hungry, and he missed his parents. She could feel that aching longing as if it were her own, and she understood then. These tears, this clammy cold, the longing, it was all Larvitar's feelings and the connection she had created between them. Lily sniffled and shifted his heavy weight in her arms. He was quite heavy even for being so young, and she struggled to hold onto him and keep her balance.

"It's okay, you're safe now," Lily said. "I'm gonna get you out of here, I promise."

"Lily!" Lance called down to her. "What's going on?"

"I've got him!" she called back up. "But I don't think I can hold onto him and Tiny at the same time!"

There was some shuffling above, and then a flash of bright white light. The pink Dragonair coalesced next to Lance and poked her head over the edge of the precipice.

"Wait there," Lance called down.

The two Dragonair slithered down the edge of the crag, and together they lifted Lily and Larvitar up and out, sharing the weight and curling their serpentine bodies around her so she could hold onto Larvitar. The morning was well underway at this point, and Lily squinted as her eyes adjusted. The Dragonair set her down on the grass, still dewy and sparkling in the sunlight. Lance emerged from the crag and dusted off his pants.

"Look," Lily said, smiling as she held up Larvitar. "He's okay!"

Lance glowered at her and inspected Larvitar, still huddled in her arms. "He looks malnourished. He won't last long out here alone."

Larvitar, somewhat calmed now that they were back on the

ground, opened his mouth and let out a desperate cry so loud that Lily was sure he blew out her eardrum. She set him on the ground, and he plopped down on his rear and continued to wail. A flock of Spearow took flight out of the woods to the east, filling the sky with their incessant squawking. They only made Larvitar howl the louder.

Lance covered his ears and eyed the fleeing Spearow. He said something, but it was hard to hear him over Larvitar. Lily had her own ears covered, too.

"What?" she said.

"I said, let's get out of here!" he shouted to be heard.

"But what about Larvitar?" she shouted back.

Dodrio and Pikachu emerged, drawn by all the commotion, but they lingered near the edge of the woods. The two Dragonair were strangely silent. That was when Lily saw the trees move to the east, where the Spearow had taken flight. They shook violently, and they came closer. Lance saw it, too, and grabbed Lily's wrist.

"Lily, let's *go*!"

"But we can't just leave Larvitar here alone!"

The trees at the edge of the woods quivered and fell, and their trunks snapped as something barreled through recklessly. Lance whirled, his grim expression unchanged, and Lily's jaw dropped in horror at the sight of two fully-evolved Tyranitar on a murderous rampage headed straight for them and the bleating Larvitar. His parents, she presumed.

"Uh oh," Lily said.

"What?" Lance said, having trouble hearing anything over Larvitar's wailing and the Tyranitar's wanton destruction of everything in their path.

"Let's go!" she said, attempting to drag him away.

But he didn't budge. The Tyranitar were closing in, their huge jaws hanging open as their blind fury over their lost offspring fueled them. Their green plate scales were hard enough to withstand crushing blows from the likes of Rhyperior and Steelix, earning them their classification as the Armor Pokemon, but it was their mercurial temperaments that caused them to fly into terrible bouts of destructive rage that made them informally known as the Insolent Pokemon. Nothing could stop a Tyranitar's rancor once it was set off until it ran its course, as Lily had seen first-hand from Ivy's Tyranitar in battle. There was no stopping that monster when he began smashing and bashing, and from the looks of things, Larvitar's formidable parents would be no different.

"Lance!" Lily shouted, her fear mounting to uncontrollable heights.

The mother Tyranitar had picked up a felled sentinel pine by the snapped trunk in her meaty arms and dragged it along with every

intention of hurling it at Lance and Lily and their Pokemon. It was three times Tyranitar's height, and she carried it like a baseball bat.

Lance still had her by the wrist and yanked her to his side so she could hear him over the racket. "Time to make another choice, Lily."

Before she had time to question him, he shoved her behind him. He walked toward the stampeding Tyranitar, directly in their path.

Lily gaped as she stared after him. "Lance!" she screamed. "Stop, what're you doing?!"

He lifted his arms at his sides as if to greet them, and he made no move to call out his Dragons or get out of the way. They would crush him underfoot, there was no doubt. The father Tyranitar opened his mouth and let out an otherworldly roar that rattled Lily's bones. She got up, her knee throbbing in protest, and dashed after Lance.

"Lance!" she screamed again.

But if he heard her, he ignored her and walked toward his death. There was no time to think or be angry or even afraid as she caught up to him and stared death in the face. Larvitar cried behind her, and the two Dragonair were afraid of the killing intent the Tyranitar were projecting. Gritting her teeth, Lily reached for the Tyranitar with both hands and prayed.

"It's not about control, it's a connection."

She clung to those words as she shouted, "Stop!"

The mother Tyranitar flung the pine tree she was carrying, and it came crashing to the earth somewhere behind Lance and Lily. The ground shook, and Lily closed her eyes. All of a sudden, she felt a flood of emotion that threatened to knock her over. Fury like she had never known before, fear of loss, and a desperate need to protect underneath it all. A love so fierce and strong that it could uproot entire forests and smash mountains. The Tyranitar only wanted to protect their offspring from anything and anyone who would threaten his safety. Lily gagged on the force of their feelings, overcome.

When she opened her eyes, they had come to a stop and were glaring at both Lance and her. Their magnificent emerald scales, scarred and scuffed from their long lives lived in the rough wilds of northern Johto, nonetheless gleamed radiant in the morning light. Lily stared openly. They were magnificent, twelve feet tall with the male broader of shoulder and longer of tail, and they were breathing heavily. Lily had worked closely with Ivy's Tyranitar on several occasions, but these wild Tyranitar had a different air about them, not quite feral so much as unrestrained. Free, like nothing in all the world could ever give them cause for worry, except for the one thing they had razed miles of forest to recover.

The baby Larvitar waddled to them completely unafraid, his wailing less desperate and more excited now as he was reunited with

his formidable parents. They bent down to shield him with their bodies, the mother scooping him up in her arms and sniffing at him, while the father kept his eyes on Lance and Lily. Lance watched them with quiet reverence, never saying a word.

Like a dying fire, Lily felt the Tyranitar's unfathomable fury dull to a subdued simmer as they focused on Larvitar, their search finally at a successful end.

"Go," Lance said, his hand raised to the prehistoric family. "Go back to your home."

The connection Lily had felt with the Tyranitar and their baby Larvitar vanished like smoke through her fingers as she felt the familiar cold steel of Lance's control severing it. The Tyranitar collected themselves and their offspring, and together they marched back toward the decimated path they had carved through the forest, each step a rumble that shook the ground until they were far enough away and out of sight in the woods.

"Tyranitar is king of the Kyukai Valley," Lance said as he watched them retreat. "Small wonder the locals call them *Rex*."

King, Lily thought, remembering the locals who mentioned that when she first arrived here.

She stared at her hands, dusty and dirty from her tumble down the crag and her tumble out here. She could understand it, this power the Titans coveted and everyone else feared, this power that could cow kings and subdue beasts. She had felt it, their need. Their love for their baby, no different from the love she felt for the ones closest to her.

"You made the right choice," Lance said.

Lily clenched her fists and in a sudden paroxysm, she shoved him as hard as she could. He stumbled back a few steps and nearly fell, but kept his balance. Taller and physically stronger than her, he would not go down so easily. He looked at her like she might transform into a stampeding Tyranitar herself, and it was perhaps the most expressive she had ever seen him for a split second.

"You jerk!" she screamed at him. "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

"Lily, I don't---"

"You *do*," she said, seething and shaking and lunging at him for another shove, which he deftly avoided this time. "You know exactly what you did! Choice? What choice was that? It's not like I would let you die!" She tried one more time to shove him, and this time he caught her wrists and towered over her like some looming dark lord, but she didn't care anymore. "Damn you," she said, glaring up at him. "Yveltal can take you, goddamn you!"

He shook her. "Stop this," he snapped. "Your anger is both pointless

and illogical. You said you wanted me to teach you, and this was the perfect opportunity to teach you the most important lesson you needed to learn."

"I know that!"

She had surprised him for the second time in as many minutes, and he looked down at her dumbfounded.

"I *know*," Lily said, wrenching free. "Leave it to you to show me the other side of it and then take it all away." She hugged herself and sank down to her good knee. "I felt him, and them. I *felt* them, Lance." She looked up at him, and he held her gaze, stony and distant as ever. "Their fear, their anger, their love... It was beautiful. I've never... I didn't know it could be like that, this connection."

He looked like he wanted to say something. Often, he looked like he wanted to say something to her, but he rarely divulged more than was necessary. The two Dragonair deemed it safe to approach now that the Tyranitar had departed, and Dodrio padded over with Pikachu, who jumped down from her back and scampered to Lily's side all a-chitter.

He said nothing, waiting for her to catch her breath and calm down as she scratched Pikachu behind the ears to distract herself. Lily sniffled and wiped her nose. Her face was dusty and smudged where her tears had made tracks before.

"I never wanted it to be beautiful," she said, searching his face, but there was nothing there.

He set his jaw and showed her his back. "I'll see to the camp. We'll head out after you clean up."

That was the last thing he said to her all day until the evening, when they set up their small camp under the stars. Lance and Kommo-o returned with the largest Stantler carcass Lily had ever seen, and after he sawed off a hind leg to roast over the fire, Kommo-o happily dragged the rest away to gorge himself on the tender entrails. Lily flinched at Kommo-o's efficient evisceration, more precise than any butcher's knife.

The meat was crackling hot and dripping grease when it was done, and it was the best meal she'd had in ages, maybe ever. Maybe it was the exhausting day, the enervating effect of this place, she couldn't say. Everything tasted different out here, felt different. Pikachu approved of the meal and gobbled down her share greedily.

"It's my fault," Lance said suddenly across the campfire.

Lily jumped at the sound of his voice after the long day of silence, so different from their new normal that consisted of intellectually stimulating conversation about history, science, mythology, and of course, Dragons.

"What?" she blurted out. "What're you talking about?"

"Your shame," he said. "About your Titan heritage. It's...my fault."

Lily had thought she'd misheard him, but no, he had said that. This was so out of the blue, so seemingly out of character with everything she knew about this unfeeling, unflinching, unforgiving man that she could only stare.

"Dragons are the noblest and most powerful creatures to have ever walked the earth," he went on, shifting uncomfortably. "Notice how most legendary and mythical Pokemon happen to be Dragons or Dragon descendants...like Lugia."

Lily discreetly pinched the inside of her thigh to make sure this wasn't a weird dream, he was actually talking about all this to her. And he was clearly struggling, but he kept on.

"It's because they're the superior species, and we share their blood, all that power. Whatever I did in the past, whatever you may think of me personally, none of that matters, just as whatever you've done or will do in your life doesn't matter. You and I are transient in our mortality, but our inheritance as Titans is old and powerful. It transcends everything, and it's yours as much as it is mine. What you are is something to revere, not to shame. Anyone who makes you feel the lesser for it is not worthy of you."

He was looking right at her across the fire, the orange flickering in the depths of his black eyes. Never had Lily felt the weight of a gaze such as this, a person's full and undivided attention not just with words or expression, but with his entire body. It was taking everything he had to speak to her earnestly like this, like no one had ever spoken to her before, and she dared not interrupt. She wasn't sure she would have a voice to interrupt him.

"I want you to understand," he said. "This morning..." He let that hang, perhaps thinking better of what he was about to say. "Even if you despise me, I cannot abide you despising yourself."

She wasn't sure when she'd begun to weep, but there was no helping it now. Sniffling, she wiped her eyes furiously, but it was too late, he'd already seen it all, and what did it matter now?

"Do you regret it?" she asked, unable to contain the question she had been wanting to ask him all this time, all these months when a part of her knew in her bones that he was not dead, that he was too good for it to end there. "Do you regret summoning Lugia?"

He favored her with the ghost of a smile across the fire, and as before when she sketched his profile by the watering hole, she saw once again the face of a man who would call himself Champion, worshipped and respected by the best and the worst of men. Some people achieved greatness, but very few achieved it so early and so swiftly and so perfectly as to be forever above the rest even at their lowest.

"If I hadn't done it, our paths never would have crossed."

He didn't answer her question, but strangely, she found that she didn't care much about that right now. All over the world they said that Titans lied, that their control was a poison, even that they were evil. Perhaps it was even true sometimes. But tonight, Lily knew Lance was not lying to her. Whatever his past, the things he had done, he was the only person in this great wide world who could make her see that control could be connection, that power could be beautiful, that she could be proud no matter what anyone said.

She returned his smile and wiped the last of her tears. "No," she said. "I think they would have crossed. Or crashed, probably. That sounds more like us, don't you think?"

"It does."

Lily watched the flickering flames and rested her chin in her hands. "Maybe in another place, another time, maybe even as friends, or... We would have met, someday. I'm sure of it."

When he said nothing after a time, she looked up. He was watching her thoughtfully, if Lance could ever be described as thoughtful. Plotting, calculating, brooding, yes, but not tonight. Tonight he was just a man who swallowed his pride for a chance support hers.

"Yes," he said finally. "I'm sure of it, too."

It was a nice thought as they shared the warmth of the fire, their bellies full and their Dragons all around them, so far away from everything they had known. Lily was happy to hold onto it, that and the joy of connection with that baby Larvitar, long denied to her by her herself and others. Out here, it almost was like another life, another her, another him, and she didn't want it to end just yet.

Lily began to open up more after the incident with Larvitar and Tyranitar. She was eager for more practical application, to learn more about Titans' fighting techniques, about their connection with Dragons. She didn't ask Lance again about Lugia, about Shamouti, about Mewtwo or any of it. She just wanted to experience, and he obliged.

They began small. She had a soft spot for cute and soft and small, which he found dully unsurprising considering her gender and temperament, but if it got her interested in channeling her Titan control, then it was as good a place to start practicing as any.

Totodile made their nests in a placid lake overgrown with algae that they passed by, and they stopped so Lily could try connecting with them. They were enthusiastic Pokemon, full of energy that was quickly spent in their exuberance. Lily and her Omastar splashed about with three of the little blue reptiles, and she was soon soaked to the elbows and shivering, the idiot. The days were cold this far north

even under a clear sky, and Lance had no intention of dealing with her getting hypothermia due to carelessness. But she enjoyed playing with the Totodile, and he was somewhat satisfied when the larger Croconaw came to investigate all the splashing, hoping for a free meal. Lily connected with them, too, quelling their hungry intentions and directing them to the deeper waters to hunt for their next meal. By the time the more formidable Feraligatr came swimming languidly by just beneath the water's surface, Lily recalled Omastar and put some distance between herself and the lake. The gators' glassy unblinking eyes watched her retreat and sank once more beneath the green surface, invisible to passing prey.

"Next time, go for the Feraligatr directly," Lance said.

"I connected with the Croconaw," Lily defended. "And it's all the same, anyway, as long as I get the practice in, right?"

"Wrong. The more powerful the Dragon, the harder it is to control for any purpose. You know this."

"Yeah, I know."

He didn't understand her sometimes. "You have the ability," he said. "More than many Titans I've known. You stopped two rampaging Tyranitar in their tracks with your will alone. I've seen you break my own control. You can do it, but you choose not to."

She shrugged. "I guess I don't see the point unless there's a necessity. I don't *want* to control them if they don't want to be controlled."

"You just said it's all the same," Lance countered. "Whether it's Totodile or Tyranitar, it's all comes back to the Dragonsblood in your veins. The rest is semantics."

"It *is* different," she insisted. "Those feelings, it's like I'm stepping into their skin. I don't think I should be doing something so intimate so casually. You should know." She looked at him strangely. "Wait, you do feel it, right? The connection?"

"All Titans can feel it," he hedged. "But most of us choose not to."

"What does that mean?"

They were hiking through an open field overrun with coarse grass for as far as the eye could see, following the animal trails to avoid the hidden sinkholes of mud where unsavory Pokemon like Stunfisk made their homes, waiting for unsuspecting prey to get stuck in the muck.

"You wouldn't know, having grown up outside the clan's influence," Lance said. "They teach control. Everything else, the emotional connection, all of it is erased."

Lily looked horrified, as he knew she would be. "But why? That's... That's---"

"Efficient," he finished. "Pokemon are as complex as humans, especially Dragons. Should you encounter one with a will stronger

than your own, you could find yourself overwhelmed unless you block out the emotional connection. I'm sure I don't have to explain the merits of such a position."

"I understand it," Lily said. "But I think it's awful. If you do that, then all that's left is the mind-numbing control. That's just awful," she said again. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Do you block it out? I mean, what you said to me..."

He waited for her to finish.

"What you said about connection, it was... Well, it helped me get through to Larvitar, so I thought, you know?"

Even now, Lance could hear the Elder's words of admonishment all those years ago, as biting as the whip that often accompanied them. Control, it was all about control and results, nothing else mattered. Just get the job done, and never ever dishonor yourself or the clan.

"A Dragon does not weep, boy. A Dragon roars."

Under the Elder's lash, every boy and girl roared, the meek and the strong, those who survived and those who did not. He knew what Lily wanted to hear, and from the way she was looking at him, she wanted to accept it as true. She was that kind of person, always looking for the best in people. But the truth was that it was all the same to him. He could not feel the way she felt, and so it made no practical difference. No Dragon could overwhelm his control because there was nothing to reach for but a bottomless pit, slippery and cold and dark.

But they could teach him. All that Lance had never learned from people, he had learned from Dragons without the judgment and narcissism of regular social interaction. Anger and rage, sadness and sorrow, hatred and happiness and love, he experienced them all in their skins and scales. Dragonite had shared his joy and his melancholy equally, to the point that he could trick himself into thinking they were real, they were his, he was not so different from the people around him. But it was all a farce. Lance needed that emotional connection the Elder had beaten out of the rest of them to pretend, to survive, and to conquer. If not for the Dragons, he could never have learned to play his part so well among people.

But she did not need to hear any of that. And if she was half as sharp as he knew she was, she may already know the truth. But he hoped she did not.

"No," he said, answering her original question. "I never block it out."

She studied him a moment, a question lingering on her tongue, but she just nodded and accepted his answer, though whether for her sake or for his, it didn't matter.

It is incredible what people can adapt to, what they can accept as

normal after a little time and repetition. Lance and Lily had met on the battlefield, enemies of chance and circumstance, and they had fought a bloody battle to the death with the fate of the world hanging in the balance. That had been a lifetime ago. Today, they were working on Mega Evolution together.

"You're doing it wrong," Lance said.

"Seriously? But I thought I was making progress," Lily said, disappointed as she cradled her bloody hand.

"Clearly not enough progress, or that Ampharos would have Mega Evolved by now."

She rolled her eyes. "I mean I get that, but I did all the steps right."

He gave her a withering look. "This isn't a science experiment. It's---"

"---the strongest bond between a Titan and her Dragon born of trust and intimacy," she said in a deep voice that made her sound like she had stuffed cotton in her cheeks. "I know, I heard you the first nineteen times."

Lance was not amused. "That was a poor imitation of my voice."

"Really? I thought it was pretty good."

"And I haven't said that nineteen times. I wouldn't repeat myself to such a ludicrous degree."

"Well, I lost count at like five. It seemed like a lot. And you definitely repeat yourself all the time."

Ampharos had lost interest in everything but his lunch as he began to graze under the shade of an ancient oak tree. Pikachu was napping curled up in the pink Dragonair's slender body, and Charizard was eyeing her as though debating whether or not it would be worth it turn Pikachu into a light aperitif.

"I wouldn't repeat myself to such a..." Lance cut himself off when he saw her grin cheekily, and he realized he'd literally just said that. "The point is, you're still doing it wrong."

Lily sighed. "Let's take a break, okay? I'm tired. I'm going for a swim."

"You're what?"

Lily had been dying to try out the natural hot springs that became ever more numerous the farther north they ventured. Most were small, not quite big enough even for a single person to sit in, or far too hot. Some even exploded as natural geysers like clockwork. This one was warm but not dangerously scalding, and it was large enough to accommodate twenty people easily. It was the deepest shade of emerald green Lily had ever seen and surrounded by grey stones covered in a strange purple moss so dark it was nearly black. Juicy orange Occa berries grew in clusters among fleshy leaves, nourished on the heat of the hot spring. Aipom and Ambipom were already

lounging in the hot spring to combat the teeth-chattering chill of the northern autumn, and they squawked and clucked to each other like gossiping girls as Lily stripped and slipped into the water to join them. The heat was heavenly, and she dunked her head to savor it.

Lance stood on the opposite side of the pool, his angular scowl deep-set as he eyed the monkeys grinning lasciviously at one another.

"You'll freeze when you get out," he warned.

"So what? I'm warm now."

He said nothing to that. Something about the way he looked a little uncomfortable made her smile to herself. *Enemies by chance and circumstance.* What if circumstances had been different? In this place, so far away from everyone and everything she knew, it was easy to imagine things were different. He was a dead man to everyone but her. It was almost enough to forget the things he'd done, but the longer she looked, the more she knew she never could, not truly.

Absorbed in thought, she was slow to notice him stripping down and slipping into the hot water across the way. A nearby Aipom clucked indignantly as Lance took up more space than he ought to have, and it sprayed steaming water everywhere with its dexterous tail as it clambered away in disgrace.

"Oh," Lily said. "Um..."

He was submerged up to mid chest, but from what she could see, he was in excellent shape. He would be, she thought. *He was the Champion, after all.* Ash was fit, too, but he was short and stocky where Lance was tall and lithe, smooth and round where Lance was angular and cut. Even their shades were different---Ash was dark and smoldering like the Ghosts that haunted him until he started talking and laughing, whereas Lance was bright and fiery until it became clear that he was not going to say anything at all, much less smile.

Like night and day, Lily thought, bemused.

Ash was still a boy in so many ways, struggling to find himself and his purpose, where Lance was a man of passion so sure of himself and his place in the world like no one Lily had ever met before. Or at least, he used to be before Shamouti, before her. He caught her staring, and she blushed, assuming he'd gotten the wrong idea.

"Sorry, I wasn't looking. I mean, I was *looking,* but I wasn't thinking what you think I was thinking. I think," she blurted out, regretting every word as she spoke it and cursing her rambling tendencies.

Lance hardly reacted. "Why are you so uncomfortable? I've made it abundantly clear that I have no intention of causing you harm."

She blinked in surprise. "What? No, that's not it. Of course I know that."

"Then what is it?"

God, she envied him that, the way he could cut past emotions and

circumstance and get to the bottom line. Lily was no psychologist and she harbored no delusions as to such, but she had her suspicions that Lance had an empathy problem. Specifically, that he had very little of it, or perhaps none at all. He put on a good enough show, but there was very little behind much of his words beyond the endgame. There had been a few exceptions, the most recent being his moving speech to her about not being ashamed of who and what she was. Even now, she could not believe that it had really happened, that he'd all but apologized for what he'd done if only because it had caused her pain. And she still had no idea how to process it, what to make of it, except that she was sure no one had ever said something so beautiful to her before, not even Ash.

"I don't know if you remember Ash," she said. "He was there on Shamouti..."

"Ash Ketchum," Lance said tonelessly. "I never met him personally, but I'm aware of his existence as the second Medium."

Lily wasn't sure what he meant by that. "Yeah, Morty's the other one in our generation, I guess."

"Why is Ash relevant?"

"Oh, well, he's my... I mean, we're sort of together."

"And?"

He's worse than Steven Stone, she found herself thinking. The time she'd shared with the Hoenn Champion in the basement cell of Saffron City's Silph Co. so long ago still stuck in her memory. He'd been a man to take great care with his words, saying little and imparting only what he wanted her to know. With Steven, she'd gotten the sense that he was always playing games with everyone, friend and foe alike, and constantly changing the rules with no warning. Lance, on the other hand, made no secret of his objectives and held the feelings and reactions of others in little to no regard. She wasn't sure if she would ever get used to it, but it no longer came as too much of a shock.

"And...I dunno, I've just been thinking about him lately. He's been away training in the Silver Mountains for months."

"I see."

She peered at him, sensing there was more. "What?"

"The Silver Mountains are a harsh and cruel place. Even I would not venture there lightly."

"They can't be any worse than this place," she said, unable to keep the worry from her voice.

"At this time of year, the snow storms will be sweeping through, and Rhyperior and Steelix will be gorging themselves for the winter hibernation on anything with a pulse. I don't envy him."

Lily felt her jaw slacken. "Gee, thanks for making me feel better."

"I wasn't trying to make you feel anything. It's simply the way

things are."

Lily frowned and sank deeper into the hot water. Pikachu was nearby eating an Occa berry and spilling sticky orange juice everywhere. She would need a bath.

"...Agatha would often retreat to the Silver Mountains alone," Lance said at length. "Mediums are difficult to kill, trust me."

The way he said it so casually gave her a chill despite the warmth of the hot spring. There was a time when he'd tried to do just that. Even so, she recognized his feeble attempt to assuage her fears, and that had to count for something from a man who cared little and less for the feelings of others.

"Yeah," Lily said. "I'm sure he's fine. Nothing could ever get Ash down."

Lance said nothing to that, and she let her mind linger on thoughts of Ash.

"You know, the truth is, I'm not worried so much about his safety," Lily said. "But he spent most of his life never knowing what he was, and now that he does know, there's not a whole lot of people he can talk to about it. And he's always been a guy who has to do things himself, like just hearing it from others doesn't really do it for him, you know?"

Lance remained silent.

"I guess... I guess he went out there looking for something, but I know he won't find it in those mountains. I think he knows it, too, but it's just hard. I wish I could've done more to help him."

"He's a Medium," Lance said. "You're a Titan. There's nothing you can do to help him any more than he can help you."

"Right," Lily said, a little sad. "But you can help me."

The Ambipom and Aipom had noticed Pikachu eating an Occa berry, and two of them began to chase her about, flailing wildly with their tail hands in defense of the food they claimed as theirs. One of them splashed water at Pikachu, and she reacted with a Thunder Wave that paralyzed one of the grinning Aipom and sent him sinking in the water. His kin squawked angrily, and an Ambipom fished out the paralyzed chimp with her tails and shook him until he came to. When Ampharos lumbered near, drawn by the commotion, the monkeys were less brave and decided not to interfere with the Light Pokemon's interest in the Occa berries. Some fights were not worth picking. Pikachu chittered at them angrily and proceeded to spitefully bite into another Occa berry next to Ampharos, where the monkeys would not dare to interfere.

Lily and Lance had stopped to watch the commotion, and she couldn't help but laugh. "Amphy to the rescue, as usual," she said.

Lance was quiet, though that was not out of the ordinary. She felt

him watching her across the pool and wondered what he could possibly be thinking about.

"You know," she said. "You really are helping me. I feel like I'm learning so many things that I never would've considered if... I wish there was something I could do to help you."

"Help me?"

"Well, yeah. A lot of this has felt like a one-way deal with you teaching me things. I doubt there's much I could teach you, but I guess I feel like I should repay you somehow."

"I didn't make the offer with a quid-pro-quo in mind."

"I know, I didn't mean it like that, sorry. More like... I dunno, I just want to do something for you." She bit her lip. "I could, I mean, maybe I could talk to Clair..."

"No," Lance said sharply.

His harshness startled her.

"No," he said again, a little more gently this time. "I died on Shamouti that day. There's no coming back from the dead."

Lily nodded. Of course he wouldn't want anyone to know. *So stupid.* As if Clair would pardon him on behalf of the Taki Dynasty. As if he wouldn't be immediately taken into custody by the International Police and tried for his crimes against humanity. As if he would even want his old life back. He was right, it had disappeared when the world pronounced him dead. It was a delusion, and she couldn't believe she'd even suggested it. She knew him better than that, surely.

"You could stay," his voice echoed in the halls of memory even now. *"Stay, and you'll understand a little of what I mean."*

"I'm sorry, Lance," she said, hugging herself and suddenly exhausted. "I'm so sorry things happened the way they did. I wish it had all been different. I wish..."

I wish I could stay.

"Wishes are for dreamers and fools," he said, the bite gone from his voice. Maybe it was the heat or her lethargy, but she thought he sounded a little sad.

"Then I guess I'm a dreamer," she said.

They remained there for a little while longer soaking up the heat, until he rose and got out. Lily averted her gaze to give him some privacy.

"We should continue soon," Lance said when he'd gotten his pants on and was buckling his boots. "It's not far now to where Mewtwo landed."

Mewtwo.

She's almost forgotten that was why they were even doing this, why she'd come out here. Not for herself, but for everyone else. Lance left her alone to dress in private, but she suddenly lost all the energy

that the hot spring had restored as her thoughts drifted to Mewtwo.

"You could stay..."

She wiped her eyes. Her hands were pruning. She had stayed here far too long already, and it was time to go. So she got out and shivered against the cold as she clumsily dressed, numb within minutes.

Chapter 10

Morty leaped out of bed and ran to the bathroom when he heard Ash's scream. Ninetales was hot on his heels, and Banette waddled along after him on ungainly frayed legs. When he found Ash sprawled on the floor surrounded by shards of broken mirror, Gengar and Mismagius were already there, having passed through the thick stone walls to respond to Ash's fear. Like a pair of hungry dogs, they searched the small bathroom for signs of a threat, their fierce killing intent palpable. Morty stopped in the doorway, wary of them both in this state. Shedinja hovered just behind him, deathly silent.

"Ash," Morty called to him. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Ash was shaking on the floor, from fear and the chill. He'd cut his hand on a shard of broken mirror glass, and a smear of red painted the stone floor next to him. Banette began to make a scraping noise like teeth grinding when he smelled Ash's blood, and Morty scooped him up so he couldn't go near Ash.

"I saw them, I know I did," Ash said, his voice shaking with fear. His Ghosts were giddy as they exploded into their gaseous forms and swirled around the room, their baleful whispers intensifying as they hunted whatever had spooked Ash. "I saw them!"

"Ash, listen to me," Morty said. "I need you to calm down. Gengar and Mismagius feel your fear, and it's making them crazy. Get ahold of yourself."

"What?" Ash looked around, dazed, and swore when his bloody hand scraped the floor. "Damnit. Agh, shut up!" He slapped his hands over his ears to blot out the spectral whispers.

Pikachu was awake and bounded past Morty to get to Ash.

"Pika, wait!" Morty tried to stop the speedy rodent, but he was too slow.

Pikachu ran smack into Ash and sent them both tumbling to the floor anew. Ash caught him against his chest and coughed. Slowly, Mismagius and Gengar settled down and sank to the floor, emerging in their corporeal forms as though through a black fog. Banette struggled out of Morty's arms and landed on the floor with a little *plop*, which Gengar thought was so funny that he stuck his rotted tongue out and fell over laughing.

Seeing that Pikachu had broken Ash's terror trance, Morty went to help him.

"Hey, let's get you up," he said gently.

"The mirror," Ash protested.

"I'll clean it up later. How about some coffee?"

Ash nodded numbly and let Morty lead him back to the living area,

where Shedinja was waiting and watching. "Yeah, coffee. Yeah. Thanks, man."

Ash moved like an old man in Morty's grip, frail and shaking as he shrank in on himself. He sank into the rocking chair like he couldn't support his own weight and held a quilt over his lap in a white-knuckled grip. Morty was hesitant to leave him like this. He'd never seen Ash so stricken before. It was almost easy to believe nothing scared Ash, but whatever he thought he'd seen tonight certainly had.

He noticed the smear on Ash's ear and the cut on his hand, dark with coagulated blood. "Ash," he said gently. "Why don't you come to the sink to wash off the blood?"

"The sink?" Ash's red eyes flashed with emotion, and he averted his gaze and receded into himself like a turtle. "No, I'm okay. I'll just stay here."

Morty looked at him, puzzled. *What did you see, Ash?* A part of him did not want to know. Without a word, Morty returned to the kitchen to start the coffee and retrieve a damp washcloth for Ash.

The coffee maker bubbled and popped. Over his shoulder, Misdreavus bubbled up and blinked shadowy red eyes at him. She sent a tremor of concern down his spine that made him shiver.

"It's all right, Misdreavus," he whispered to the Ghost. "You can go back to sleep. Shedinja will stay up with me."

The floating husk that was Shedinja was hovering silently behind Morty and made no sound even to acknowledge its guardianship while Misdreavus rested. But she receded back within Morty, satisfied for now, and Morty went back to the living area with two large mugs of piping hot coffee. If he was going to be awake, then he wanted to be properly fueled.

Ash accepted the coffee and warmed his bloodless fingers around it, but he didn't drink. Morty took a moment to pile another log on the dying fire to get a blaze going, then sat down on the sofa across from Ash. He said nothing for a while as he observed. Mismagius and Gengar were back to normal as though nothing had been amiss, with Gengar watching the flames, entranced, and Mismagius floating about aimlessly. Only Ash seemed to feel the lingering effects of his fear.

"So," Morty said. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Ash looked up at him, his red eyes bloodshot from the lack of sleep and the night's ordeals. He looked like half a corpse, a stunted child in the large rocking chair that threatened to engulf him. "I don't really know what happened."

"Well, we know you Mega Evolved Gengar in your sleep," Morty offered. "And then, something you saw in the bathroom just now scared you half to death. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Ash shook his head and cradled his coffee mug closer. "This is so

dumb. I'm dumb."

Pikachu looked up at Ash, his ears flat over his back, and squeaked.

"You're not dumb, Ash. You got scared. Everybody does."

"Not like this. You didn't see it, Morty. Fuck." He rubbed his tired eyes. "Maybe I didn't really see it, either. I dunno."

Morty paused to choose his words carefully. "I didn't see it, but you did. Whether it's real or not isn't the issue. Something is going on with you, and I think it has to do with Mega Gengar."

"Mega Gengar," Ash repeated, glancing at the Ghost lounging by the fire with Banette. "You think... You think Gengar's doing all this?"

"I don't know. To be honest, I don't know much about Mega Ghosts. They're not exactly a common sight, but..."

"But?" Ash prompted.

"But there are rumors. And stories. Very old stories. I came across some in my research after I became a Gym Leader. Agatha talked about them once, and I was curious. Banette supposedly has the power to Mega Evolve, but I've never tried it."

"Why not?"

"Because there are some doors you can't close once you open them."

"...You know, I get that you're trying to help me and all, but you have this ability to make everything sound really bad."

Morty was unmoved. "I'm not trying to make you feel better, Ash. I want you to understand the gravity of your situation. That's the best way I know how to help you."

Ash sipped his coffee and took a moment to compose himself. "Okay, fine. Lay it on me. What kinda shit did I start this time?"

"That's the thing. Mega Evolution has been researched and we have more information today than we ever had before. But when it comes to Ghosts---"

"We're shit outta luck. Right, why am I even surprised?"

"In theory, a Mega Ghost should behave similarly to any other Mega Pokemon," Morty said. "Mega Evolution binds a Tamer and his Mega Pokemon, meaning they share their strength and their weakness. It's a double-edged sword. But with Ghosts, we already have that bond normally."

Ash nodded. "You mean like the emotional connection thing."

"Yes," Morty said. "Imagine that connection amplified a hundred-fold."

Ash had regained a little of his color now that the conversation had turned from his personal fears to something more theoretical. "So you think it can be dangerous? That level of connection?"

"I think like anything that concerns Ghosts, it has the potential to

be extremely dangerous if used improperly."

"Meaning..."

"Meaning the only way to safeguard yourself is to practice."

Ash did not like that answer. "None of this started happening until Gengar started Mega Evolving. No way."

"Unfortunately, Ash, you might not have a choice. There are some doors you can't close---"

"Yeah, yeah, I got that part." He set down his coffee mug and ran his hands through his bedraggled hair. "So that thing'll find me again..."

"What thing?"

Ash didn't answer.

"Ash, you said you saw something when I found you in the bathroom." He leaned forward over the coffee table in between them. "What was it?"

Ash pulled the quilt higher over his lap and glanced at Gengar by the fire. "It was a...Ghost."

"A Ghost you didn't know," Morty pressed.

"I think so."

"And you saw it in the mirror? Was this the first time you saw it?"

"Yeah. I mean, no." He glanced at the kitchen. "I was washing dishes the other day, and the water just sorta...changed. I thought it was Gengar pulling pranks like always, but..."

"...But you felt threatened."

Ash looked at him. "No, not that."

"I'm confused. Ash, I saw you in there. I've never seen you so afraid."

"It wasn't threatening me," he insisted. "It was happy."

Cold fingers crawled up Morty's spine, unbidden. Banette swiveled his head around from the fireplace to smile at him, baleful red eyes glowing with secret mirth. Morty's mouth went dry.

"It found me, and...and it was happy," Ash said, barely a whisper.

Morty had no idea what to say to him.

"That's not good," Ash said, forcing a smile. "You always know what to say."

"Ash, that's not..."

"I'm fucked," Ash said, his laughter strained. "It's all over your face."

Morty set his jaw.

"Power and strength come in many forms, sometimes as we least expect them," Agatha had warned them the day Morty met Ash on Cinnabar Island. *"As Mediums, we can see what others can't. The question I want you, both of you, to ask yourselves is what to do when you see it. Because you will see it, long before the rest do. That decision---it can be a gift, or it*

can be a curse."

A gift, or a curse. Morty had always thought of this existence as a cursed one, a grudge heavy on his shoulders that he would live with long after everyone he knew was dead. Until Ash had shown him another way. Even now, Ash probably didn't know how much he had changed Morty's life simply by being himself.

He owed it to Ash to return the favor to the best of his abilities, as little as they may be.

"You're not," Morty said with a conviction that visibly startled Ash. "Whatever this is, whatever's happening to you, I'm going to help you fix it. You have my word."

"How?" He sounded so small and beaten, so very unlike the Ash Morty knew.

"One step at a time," Morty said, thinking. "The mirror. You said you saw the Ghost in the mirror."

"Yeah."

"Then that's the first step. We'll get rid of all the mirrors here. It can't haunt you if it can't see you."

Ash nodded as if to convince himself more than to agree. "Right, yeah, okay." He glanced at Gengar, who felt his attention and turned to stick his tongue out. "What about Gengar?"

"Just like I said. Practice makes perfect. If you can learn how to control the Mega Evolution, then at least you won't be caught off guard again."

"Right..."

Morty held his hand out across the table. "And I'll be right here with you every step of the way. Whatever's looking for you, or why, the next time it shows up, it'll have us both to contend with."

Ash reached for his hand and shook it. "Okay," he said, a little stronger. "Thanks, Morty. I, um... I really owe you big time now."

Morty spared him a slight smile. "Not at all. This will make us even, trust me."

Gengar stared at Morty and his hand clasped in Ash's. His maniacal laughter filled the room, happy.

Mega Evolving Gengar was a team effort. As a Mega Ghost, Gengar's control over Ash's emotions and sanity reached staggering heights, insurmountable. Mismagius and Morty's Ghosts were afraid of him, but together under Morty's leadership, they managed to keep their wits about them well enough to rein in Mega Gengar's malevolent caprice. To a point.

"Ash, get ahold of yourself!" Morty shouted somewhere a thousand miles away.

It felt like Ash's eyes would burst from their sockets and his tongue would split in two all the way down his throat, until he himself split

in two: one side giddy with sadistic melancholy and the other desperately gasping for reprieve. Ash had never felt such intensity of feeling, such violent enmity directed currently at Mismagius, who was trying to reach Ash with Mega Gengar in her way. Was that Mismagius? Or was it the eyes, sinister crimson, that haunted his dreams? No, he couldn't let them see him!

Don't look, he heard himself say. *Don't look in the mirror!*

"There's no mirror!" Morty shouted at him over the howling winter winds. "Ash, you can control Mega Gengar! He's just another Ghost like all the rest!"

I'm just a Ghost, a Ghost...a...Ghost...

An intense sadness crippled him, and Ash sank into the snowdrift. He barely felt the bitter cold. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on Mega Gengar's voice, to reach him, but instead he saw a vision of a man he had never seen before tending a fire as his wife and children looked on. He was laughing at something, but when Ash reached for him, his tears of joy ran red and his teeth fell out, rotted pebbles buried in the earthen floor. His laughter intensified, and his family faded to shadows, forgotten. Ash felt himself begin to sob even as he laughed, a bizarre scene he could not help but mock and mourn all at once.

And then there was a hand on his shoulder, and Mismagius's familiar tranquil chill that cut deeper than the snow. Suddenly, the laughter faded and the tears froze on his cheek, and he was left half buried in the snow, shivering. Mega Gengar faced him, three eyes wide like he was just seeing Ash for the first time, and he smiled.

Imago...

Ash reached for Mega Gengar, and Morty reached for him to help him up. Mega Gengar's third eye closed, and soon he shrank back to his normal form and fell back on his rear in the corrupted black snow. Mismagius merged with Ash, and instantly he felt his strength returning.

"Ash," Morty said. "You're okay?"

"I think I saw..."

"What? The eyes again?"

"No, I..."

He could vaguely remember the man in his vision, hear his laughter and his family's laughter.

"No, it was something else," Ash said, watching Gengar. "Something else..."

Morty was barely recognizable through his thick scarf and snow goggles. "Let's rest for today. That was better than the last time, at least."

They headed back inside Agatha's safe house, and Ash was glad for

it. Every day for the last week, they had been working on Gengar's Mega Evolution. After disposing of all the mirrors in the house, Morty enacted a new house rule of no baths, no filled sinks, no containers of liquid larger than a mug. Ash didn't know if it really helped, but he hadn't had another incident with the creepy red eyes, so that was at least something to be thankful for when he was forced to endure tepid sponge baths just to get his stink out.

At first, it had been like the first night when he realized he'd been Mega Evolving Gengar in his sleep: uncontrollable, insatiable, and utterly overwhelming. Even the stronger Mismagius was no match for Mega Gengar alone. It reminded Ash of the first time he'd met Gengar. Back then, he'd been a Haunter and Ash a newly cognizant Medium. The lack of self-awareness, the fear, the total chaos of sharing his body and thoughts with another's spirit had been like discovering he had been deaf his whole life and now all he heard were thunderous symphonies day and night. This was a thousand times worse.

But true to his word, Morty did not give up on him. He and Ash changed Gengar's dormant time strictly to hours when Ash was awake. Morty did all the cooking and dishwashing himself, while Ash was excommunicated from the kitchen and all its sharp and reflective perils. Ash was not allowed to handle knives or glass or anything sharp. He was forced to drink coffee out of an old plastic sippy cup with a lid mysteriously stowed at the back of a cabinet, though Agatha had no children and neither of them could think of why on earth she would keep such an item here, of all places.

It was slow progress, but it was progress nonetheless. Like the pain that dulled each time Ash cut his hand to feed his blood to Gengar, breathing Mega Gengar's noxious fumes burned less and less. This was the first time he'd seen the vision of a man he'd never seen before, though.

"A man?" Morty asked as they ate dinner together. "What man?"

"That's just it," Ash said through a mouthful of potatoes. "No idea. Never seen the guy before."

"Ghosts sometimes show us visions of the past," Morty said. "Like memories."

"Yeah, I remember Gengar did that once when he was a Haunter."

"You must have seen this man before," Morty said. "Either that, or it was Gengar's memory."

Gengar's memory...

Morty was watching him. "Ash? What is it?"

"I'm just a Ghost," he said.

"What?"

Is that what I saw? Gengar's memory? Then who was that man? That family?

"Ash," Morty said. "You were saying?"

"Hey, you ever wonder where Ghosts actually come from?"

Morty frowned. "You don't know?"

"Wait, you do?"

"Of course. They come from the Ghost Plane, a parallel dimension."

"Oh... Wait, yeah, I think I remember Agatha mentioning that before."

"Why the sudden interest?"

Ash pushed his peas around his plate. "Nothin', just... I dunno. Ghosts are dead, so even if they came from another world, doesn't that mean they musta been alive once?"

"I guess that's a logical deduction. It's just as plausible that what we call 'Ghosts' aren't dead at all, but that they just follow a different set of physical laws."

Ash groaned. "No science, please. My head hurts enough on a daily basis as it is."

Morty sighed. "I just mean that there's a lot we don't know about Ghosts. We call them Ghosts just because that makes them familiar to us, something we can label them in our own terms. But it also divides us from them, the living and the Other."

"Not us," Ash said. "Imago. We're the same. Isn't that the point?"

Morty sipped his water. "Is it? Are you really comfortable being closer to Ghosts than to your fellow humans?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Morty shrugged. "Nothing, just an exercise in debate. You and I can never forget that we have a foot on either side of the line."

Ash glanced at Shedinja, who seemed to be staring in every direction at once from its place hovering by the sofa.

"Yeah," Ash said.

"I didn't say that to make you uncomfortable," Morty said. "Actually, it's something I learned from you."

"Huh?"

"I used to think being a Medium was a curse. I believe I explained to you how I met Banette back on Cinnabar."

Ash would never forget that sad tale and how happily depressed Morty had seemed just recounting it. Banette, hearing his name, waddled to the dinner table and tugged on Morty's pant leg like a cat wanting to be picked up, and Morty obliged him. They made a queer sight, a father with his decomposing child on his knee.

"I remember," Ash said.

"You taught me that finding Banette wasn't a curse upon me, but a blessing for everyone else around me. If I hadn't saved Banette from that burning house, he would have gone on to devour countless children over the years. And he would have been all alone."

"Well, it sounds a lot wiser when you say it," Ash teased.

"I'm serious. It's because of you that I was able to see my life in a different light. If it hadn't been for you, I never would have accepted responsibility for Shedinja, and its husk may have been destroyed without ever getting the chance to try living."

"I did all that?" Ash felt himself grow warm at Morty's earnestness.

"You did. So let me return the favor. Don't be afraid of Mega Gengar. He feels what you feel because he's your reflection, and you're his. He's a lot stronger in his Mega Form, but he's still the Gengar you've always known. I think when you can truly accept that, you'll be able to master Mega Evolution."

Ash was stunned at Morty's faith in him. He laughed.

"Ash?" Morty asked, concerned.

"No, sorry," Ash said. "Just if you're that confident, then I better get my act together and prove you right. I feel like it's the least I can do."

Morty smiled. "That's the spirit."

Ash raised his sippy cup in a toast. "Tell me that was an intentional pun."

Morty clinked his glass to Ash's sippy cup. "Maybe."

"Dude, you're telling jokes now? Maybe I really did change your life."

They laughed together, and it felt good. Shedinja was drawn to the sound and drifted closer to listen to it, this strange shared joy it had never known.

Merging with Mega Gengar was the equivalent of free falling and watching the ground rush to meet you: counting down the seconds until the inevitable bone-crushing *splat*. That, but in an endless loop of near-mortality, teasing, even flirtatious, that damp heat sensation in your mouth just before you're about to throw up. Ash couldn't take it for more than a second or two the first ten times they tried it.

Until finally, he held on to the point at which he was sure he would tear his own belly open and claw out his insides, and it passed. The urge to vomit, the gut-clenching free fall, the fear of implosion, all of it vanished, and he was flying.

"Holy shit, Ash!"

Morty had never shown half as much emotion as he did in that moment of pure unadulterated shock at the sight of Ash, cloaked in Mega Gengar's Aura, hovering in the sky above.

"What's happening?!" Ash said, looking down and feeling the vertigo all over again.

"I don't know! Can you move?"

"I'm not sure---whoa!" Ash shot his arm forward, and he flew in that direction faster than he'd ever been able to jump. "What the fuck is this?!"

Morty leaped after him with Misdreavus's help, but he was no match for Mega Gengar's speed and apparent ability to literally fly. Ash pulled his arms back, and Mega Gengar pulled back with him, grinding them to such a violent stop that this time, Ash did throw up. Chunks of cinnamon oatmeal and Nanab berry he'd had for breakfast rained down on the pristine snow and Morty, who tragically jumped into the line of fire too late to make a clean escape. Mega Gengar thought it was so funny that Ash burst out laughing against his will even as his own vomit continued to dribble down his chin and freeze on the collar of his jacket.

"So, I can fly," Ash said later once they had both cleaned up and Morty finally got the smell of Nanab bile out of his parka.

"Yes, I saw," Morty said, still a little pissed.

"I mean, not that it didn't suck in the moment, but you gotta admit it's pretty cool."

"That remains to be seen. Can you control it?"

Ash held out a hand for Gengar, who leaped up to high five him and passed right through his hand. The Ghost tumbled back to the floor in a sad heap, his tongue lolling out. Mismagius thrummed with annoyance at his infantilism.

"Guess we'll just have to keep practicing and find out," Ash said.

Mismagius did not enjoy sharing Ash's body with Mega Gengar one bit. Her screams and susurrations were all but drowned out, an echo of an echo. For the first few tries, Mega Gengar refused even to let her in until Ash smashed his own face into the snow to send a shock of cold through them both, stunning Mega Gengar long enough to give Mismagius an opening.

Ash clutched his throbbing head in his hands and squeezed his eyes shut. "Cut it out, Mega Gengar! Mismagius isn't going anywhere, so shut up about it already!"

Pikachu hid behind Morty as Ash kneeled in the snow clutching his head in his hands and two dark shadows rose from his shoulders in a tumultuous frenzy, each trying to devour the other.

"Control him, Ash!" Morty said, careful to keep his distance. Ninetales growled beside him, ready to lash out at the first sign of violence from Ash and his Ghosts.

"I'm *tryhihahaHAHAHA*!" Ash's voice crescendoed into hysterical laughter as Mega Gengar's emotions took over.

"Ash! Goddamnit," Morty said, daring to approach with his Pokemon.

Ash opened his eyes and saw double. Or rather, a different vision in each eye. One eye stared at the snow and Morty approaching cautiously, the other into crystalline darkness. He saw Morty stop and stare. He stank of fear.

"Oh my god," Morty gasped. "Ash, don't go in there!"

What?

What? What what??

Mega Gengar cackled, his many voices everywhere at once. Ash reached in front of him, but he couldn't see his hand through the stars in his eyes.

I know this place...

NO!!!

Mismagius's banshee shriek was a punch to the gut through the white noise, and Ash felt the blow as if he'd actually been punched. He doubled over backward only to see that Morty had in fact punched him hard in the gut. Gone were the spinning galaxies, replaced by a heaving pain in his belly and the freezing snow seeping in through his pants and boots. Ash didn't know how long he lay there in the snow, staring at the grey sky above as Mismagius and Gengar, back in his normal form, squabbled like spoiled children in his head. The ground fell away from him, and he was moving down into darkness. It wasn't until later when he woke up that he learned how Morty had carried him back inside.

"You passed out," Morty explained as he stirred a pot of stew on the stovetop. "You've been sleeping for hours. It's three in the morning. I thought you'd be hungry."

Ash tried to sit up on the sofa, but his head had other plans. He imagined a cartoon anvil falling on his head and smashing it to a pulp, and the thought awakened his Ghosts. Gengar came out laughing and assumed the shape of an anvil to try to fall on Mismagius, who was less than enthusiastic about indulging his puerile sense of humor. Morty gave the Ghosts a curious glance.

"My brain's running on fumes. Don't ask," Ash said as he lay back and willed the throbbing ache to abate.

Morty came over with a bowl of stew for Ash. It smelled heavenly. "I was just thinking that they seem to be getting along again."

Ash winced as he tried to sit up again, and Morty gave him a hand. It took him a couple minutes to adjust enough not to feel like his head would pop off his shoulders and roll under the table.

"What happened?" he asked. "I don't really remember much..."

"Nothing?" Morty asked.

Ash thought about it. He remembered Mega Evolving Gengar, and things had been going relatively well until they tried merging Mismagius to Ash for the fourth time. "I forced Mega Gengar to let Mismagius in," he recalled. "I think he wasn't too happy about it."

"I think Gengar's playful rivalry with Mismagius for your attention gets magnified into something much more hostile when he Mega Evolves," Morty said. "Just like all your emotions are amplified."

Ash sighed. "I don't get it. Mismagius is as much a part of me as Gengar. Why can't he see that? She's not the enemy."

"Maybe that's not really the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember anything else? What you saw?" Morty said instead of answering.

Ash stared at the brown bowl of stew in his hands, lost in thought. "Stars," he said. "There were stars in my eyes. That place..."

"The place from your dream?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I saw it, too," Morty said. "Through your third eye."

The way he said it sent an uncomfortable tremor down to Ash's toes. He lost his appetite. "My what?"

"Mega Gengar has a third eye."

"Yeah, the one that stays closed on his forehead. I know."

"It opened today. When Mismagius merged with you." Morty tapped him on the forehead. "I saw it manifest here, and I saw that place you described from your dreams."

Ash rubbed his forehead. There was nothing there but skin and his messy black bangs. "What're you saying? That... That my dream was real or something? That place really exists?"

Morty shook his head. "I honestly don't know, Ash. But the wider your third eye opened, the more you began to fade." He averted his gaze, uncomfortable. "It was like it was swallowing you whole. I'm sorry for punching you. I didn't know how else to snap you out of it."

Ash rubbed his sore belly. "It's fine," he said. "Fuck, my head."

"You should finish your food, and then get some rest. You need to recover your energy. I think we should take a break tomorrow."

Ash was in no position to argue with such a sensible request. "Yeah, sure."

Morty got up to wash the dishes in the kitchen, and Ash listened to the sound of the running water as he made himself eat a little more. He caught his murky reflection in the brown soup.

Red eyes, he thought. *Just like mine.*

Gengar looked up at him then and grinned.

Red like Gengar's eyes.

"Why?" Ash whispered to himself. *Why...*

Morty was drying the dishes and humming tunelessly to himself.

"Agatha said Mediums are made, not born," Ash called to Morty.

Morty stacked the clean dishes in a cabinet. "Yes, that's right," he said.

"So that's gotta mean we were chosen, right? Someone chose us. Chose me. Who was it? And why? Why me?"

Morty finished his chores and returned to the living room, where

Shedinja hovered over from the bookshelf to greet him. Morty gently ran his fingers over Shedinja's crusty husk, but the undead cicada made no sound of approval. It made no sound at all.

"You don't know how you became a Medium?" Morty asked.

"No." Ash perked up. "Wait, do you?"

Morty looked at him strangely. "Of course. Agatha turned me."

"Agatha?"

"I'm sorry, Ash. I...thought you knew this."

"No, I didn't know. When did that happen? How?"

"I told you the story of how I rescued Banette from that burning house."

"Yeah, and Agatha came to Ecruteak to meet you after."

"That's right. I was suffering severe third degree burns. The doctors had very little faith in my recovery. I would have been an easy meal for Banette, but he refrained. I think he was grateful that I'd come for him. That was how Agatha found me. She gave me her blood and her blessing, and I recovered. I woke up a Medium, and I've been this way ever since."

Ash stared at him, dumbfounded. "Her *blood*? Like... You mean like some kinky vampire shit?"

Morty frowned. "Nothing quite so trite. You know that most Tamers inherit their abilities from their parents, a blood connection. It's the same for us, just without the parents. There's a catch, however."

"A catch?"

"Mediums can't turn just anyone. There has to be reciprocation. Banette accepted me because I helped him. You could say I was open to being a Medium, in a sense. Agatha couldn't have turned some other child who didn't do what I'd done. In that way, at least, we're very different from your fictional prurient vampires."

Ash was stunned speechless at the revelation. "I never knew..."

Morty shifted in his seat. "Yes, it's...a special condition. We can only turn children, and even then only children who embrace our lonely existence. That's why there tends to be only one Medium in a generation: we can each only turn one child in the winter of our life." Morty looked at him. "Ash, are you trying to tell me that you don't know who turned you? I assumed it was another Medium. There are a few others around the world, some maybe even older than Agatha."

He shook his head. "No. I mean, I'd remember that, I think."

"You would, yes."

They fell into silence at length as Ash thought about that. *Why can't I remember who turned me?* Morty sensed his inner turmoil and broke the silence.

"I don't know why you, or why me, specifically. But maybe that's

not the right question to be asking. What matters is understanding the feeling behind it."

"There's nothing to understand," Ash said, balling his fists as he let anger and frustration of the past week spill over. "All we are is alone, forever. Agatha warned me I'd outlive everyone I love. My mom, my friends, Lily..." He pictured Lily's smiling face, so bright and happy and genuine. He couldn't imagine life after her. It would be no life at all. "What did I do to deserve a whole eternity alone? Maybe some part of you chose this, but I never did."

"Ash," Morty tried.

"I don't *want* to be alone."

Pikachu woke from his nap to Ash's raised voice. Gengar hopped onto the arm of the couch and frowned dramatically, not understanding why Ash felt so miserable.

"Maybe the Ghosts don't want to be alone, either," Morty said.

Gengar hopped onto the couch next to Ash's lap and grinned up at him in an attempt to cheer him up. Nothing could ever get Gengar down, not really. Life was a hilarious joke to him, seeing as he was technically an outside observer. Even as a Haunter, Gengar had always been messing around and amusing those around him. That first time they merged, Ash remembered the feeling, heavy and exhilarating and terrifying all at once. And the relief, glad to the point of fear Haunter had felt, like he'd waited so long for this moment.

"Ghosts are...lonely?"

"We'll outlive everyone we love, it's true," Morty said. "But Banette's outlived generations of children who never loved him. Even this world isn't really his." He lifted Banette off the floor and settled him on the cushion on his lap, where Banette began to rip into it happily with his hidden claws. "I think there's no creature half so lonely as a Ghost."

Is that why I'm a Medium? To keep Gengar and Mismagius company? But why me, of all people?

"Listen, Ash, I don't have all the answers you're looking for. But whatever's going on with you and Gengar? It's a part of you. It was meant for you, both of you."

"You really believe that?"

"Of course. Just like I was meant to save all the lives Banette would've taken if I hadn't found him in that fire."

Ash smiled tiredly. "It definitely sounds cooler when you say it."

Morty shrugged. "It sounded pretty cool when you said it to me the first time."

"Hey, Morty?"

"Hm?"

"Thanks. For everything. All this... I came out here to be alone and

sulk, but I shoulda just come to you in the first place. Maybe we'll be the last ones left alive one day, but for what it's worth, I'm glad it'll be you there with me."

Morty graced him with a rare smile. "Sure. You're not the worst company I've known."

Ash laughed despite his aching head. "Way to sing my praises."

"Give me something to sing about and we'll see."

"Okay, seriously, did you get laid or something back home? You're so, I dunno, *normal* these days. It's weird and you gotta cut it out."

They shared a laugh, and Gengar was so delighted by the sound that he did a little dance by the fire and exploded into a cloud of violet gas. Only his disembodied red eyes remained, aglow in the firelight watching Ash.

Flying with Mega Gengar soon became the most amazing experience Ash had ever had once he got over the head-splitting nausea of merging with him. Before, he could jump upwards of thirty feet while wearing his Ghosts' Auras; now, his feet never touched the ground.

"Ash! Slow down!" Morty called as he jumped with Misdreavus as quickly as he could to catch up.

Ash soared over the Silver Mountains with the wind. Mismagius floated along behind him, still wary of Mega Gengar in this form, but the Ghosts had come to a tentative ceasefire. For the moment, Ash could not be bothered about it as he experienced a kind of joy every child dreamed of growing up.

"I'm like a superhero!" he said, laughing as he glided over a snowy meadow and spooked a herd of winter Sawsbuck. The deer scattered for cover. Ash rose higher and higher, and they seemed to him small scuttling insects, so far below.

He thought he'd never fly again with Charizard gone. Charizard's Ultra Ball sat empty in his pocket, a weight he carried with him everywhere he went. But now he was soaring, and he wished Charizard were here so they could race. Such an idea would have offended the orange pseudo-Dragon's prickly pride, no doubt, but Mega Gengar was giddy at the notion and lifted Ash ever higher and faster.

They left Morty in the dust soon enough, so they headed back and landed in the snow, sending flurries everywhere. Morty touched down beside them.

"Hold your Horsea, Iron Man," Morty said. "I know you think you've got the hang of Mega Gengar's flight, but you really shouldn't be pushing yourself like this."

"Morty, we've been at this for like a month now. I *feel* great!"

"You haven't seen your own reflection in a month."

Ash's spirits fell, and Mega Gengar fell out of him in a heavy depression to pool at Morty's feet, utterly crestfallen. Morty was unmoved.

"How are you doing toning down the emotional overload?"

Ash sighed in frustration. They both knew the answer to that as Mega Gengar ugly cried and turned the snow to a pool of sticky black tar.

"So learning's a process. I'm getting better."

"I know, but I think it's important to remember exactly what we're dealing with here. Mega Gengar is on your side, but what about your dreams? That place in the stars?"

"I haven't dreamed about it again."

"Not since Mega Gengar's third eye almost swallowed you, you mean."

"Look, are you just gonna nag me all day? I said I heard you."

Morty crossed his arms. "Forgive me for worrying about your safety. It's not as if either of us has any experience with this."

Ash kneeled down and reached for Mega Gengar. Slowly, he felt their Mega bond fade and the Ghost's whispers diminish to a manageable volume. Even now, after having done this so many times, the silence after the fade was deafening. No wonder he'd almost lost his mind the first time he realized what was going on.

"You're right," Ash said at length. "Sorry. I know you're just trying to help."

"I do think you've come a long way," Morty allowed. "Even Agatha would be pleased."

Ash grinned. "Wait'll I tell her about this. I bet she never expected we'd figure out Mega Evolution one day when I first met her back in Lavender Town."

"No, I can't imagine she did."

"Hey, let's head back. I'm hungry."

"Of course you are."

With the help of their Ghosts to lighten their steps, Ash and Morty made the journey back to the safe house and enjoyed dinner together. Ash had made a small but proud dent in Agatha's eclectic library working his way through a score of murder-mystery novels. Mismagius liked to read with him, listening to the words he read in his head as the story unfolded. She giggled like a little girl when the murderer cornered one of the party guests in a closet and impaled him with the blunt end of a mop. Pikachu was content to sit in Ash's lap and doze.

"Hey, I'm turning in," Morty said, shelving an ancient copy of the Complete and True History of Layla IV: Last Queen of Alola.

"I would too reading a couple pages of that," Ash joked.

"You know, Ash, reading up on some history could be interesting for you. The old Alolan monarchy was apparently made up of Mediums in nearly every generation. That's the longest traceable line of Mediums ever recorded."

"Does it say anything about Mega Evolution in there?"

"Well, no."

"Then I'll pass."

Morty sighed. "Suit yourself. Goodnight."

"Night."

Venusaur was asleep near the fire, the enormous flower on his back appearing orange in the light. He was snoring softly, so Ash got up and went to give him a pat. Venusaur's eye opened to see Ash, but closed again soon after to resume his nap. Ash was not tired, though, and he was bored of reading for the night. He stayed with Venusaur for a bit, but soon became restless. Mismagius drifted off into the night as per her usual, while Gengar remained pretending to sleep on the floor on his belly.

"Gengar, I know you're awake," Ash said. "Ghosts don't sleep."

Gengar popped up like he'd been found out in a game of hide and seek and grinned. His rotten yellow teeth shone in the firelight, and he clapped his incorporeal hands together soundlessly in a little cheer all for himself. Ash got up and stretched. What to do? He supposed he could pick a different book. Maybe Morty had a point, after all.

He thought about what Morty had said earlier today about caution. Morty definitely had a point, Ash had to admit. But even so, he *had* made progress, and that was something. He also hadn't had any problems with dreams in a month. The creepy red eyes that had spoken to him were nowhere to be found. Maybe whatever they belonged to had forgotten about him.

Even if they haven't forgotten, I'm stronger now. Mega Gengar's strong.

He was stronger than any Pokemon Ash had ever trained, even Charizard. He fantasized about what dead and disgraced former Champion Lance would think if he had to face Ash with Mega Gengar.

"Even he'd shit himself," Ash muttered to himself. He clenched his fists. "Dragonite woulda been no match for us."

But that was in the past, and both Lance and his Dragonite were long dead along with Charizard. And it hadn't been Ash to face Lance, but Lily. The thought of Lily eased his flash of anger, and he leaned against the mantle. The old burn scars on his back and shoulders itched, tight. He wondered what Lily was doing now. Maybe sleeping in their bed back at Indigo Plateau. Or maybe she was outside on the balcony looking at the stars. She did that often, search the night sky. Ash wondered was she was looking for, but got the feeling that whatever it was, she wouldn't find it. Nothing much ever came from

wishing or hoping without action.

Ash headed to the kitchen for a glass of water and ran the faucet. He stared at the water as it ran over the edge of his sippy cup and pooled in the metal basin.

"You haven't seen your own reflection in a month."

Frowning, Ash plugged the drain and waited for the sink to fill. His watery reflection stared back up at him from the depths. He drew a knife from the dish drainer and unwrapped the old bandage over his palm. The cut was still healing and opened up easily enough when he sliced it. Drops of his blood fell into the water and dissipated like pale pink smoke.

"I'm not afraid," he said to his reflection. "Not of Lance and his Dragonite, and definitely not of some acid trip dream."

Gengar smelled his blood and bounded over eagerly. He hopped onto the sink and stuck his rotted grey tongue in the pinkish water, and before Ash's eyes he transformed. The third eye on his forehead slowly opened, yellow and swiveling as though searching for something. Ash clenched his bloody hand.

"Nothing to say?" Ash said to his reflection in the water. "Maybe you're the one who's afraid of me."

There was no response, no glowing red eyes. There was only the tepid water, growing pinker as his blood merged with it. He plunged his hand into the water to unplug the sink when suddenly Mega Gengar jumped inside him. Ash choked as the awful tremor of nausea and pain, like he was being pulled apart from his extremities, racked his body. It passed after a couple seconds, and sweating he leaned over the sink willing himself not to throw up.

When the worst passed, he opened his eyes. The water had changed. Darkness bubbled up from the drain, and pinpricks of light floated in the depths. Ribbons of blue and violet and magenta swirled together like watercolor paint, and deeper in Ash could see rivers and mountains and waterfalls cascading to the heavens.

"That place," he said. *From my dream...*

His reflection was a silhouette against the celestial pool, aflame with Mega Gengar's Aura. Ash touched a hand to his forehead, where Mega Gengar's third eye had opened up and reflected the bizarre galaxy.

"I can see it," he said, mesmerized as he leaned closer to the edge of the sink.

The countertop he was leaning on began to melt into shadows, the shapes of the plates in the rack, the faucet. The sound of Venusaur snoring softly, the crackling fire, the smell of stone and cold and blankets. All of it faded in a slow diminuendo as he reached for the stars.

He didn't even feel the water on his face as he dove into it. He opened his mouth in a scream, but it was silenced out in the water that wasn't wet and didn't drown him. He was floating in it, sinking, and then he was flying.

"What is this?" he asked as he hovered, suspended among the stars.

Gone was the kitchen, the warmth of the fire at his back, the scars that itched and pulled his skin taut. Gone was the sting in his hand where he'd cut himself, the incessant aching in his head, the nausea and the bile. Gone was feeling, except the floating.

He turned back, and above he saw the closest star, a shimmering pool and his own reflection staring back at him in a trance. Ash screamed, but the sound reverberated in this viscous murky space to nothing, crushed by the infinity of this place.

"That's me..."

He reached for his reflection that wasn't a reflection at all, but his body, lifelessly submerged in the sink and staring at nothing. His hand glimmered, mere shadows cast by the light. The longer he stared at his hand, the harder it was to make out its shape. A crushing melancholy took root within him as he stared back at himself.

"I'm... Am I...?"

Dead?

The sadness coiled in an angry twisted knot in his throat. He had the urge to cry, but no tears came. He wasn't even breathing.

But his reflection was. Even still as a corpse, he could hear it clearly, the beating of his heart.

"My body," he said, understanding. "Then in here, I'm..."

Here, I'm... Here...I'm here...

Ash whirled. "Mega Gengar," he said.

He smiled, but it wasn't his.

Imago...

"I get it," Ash said, looking down at his feet that didn't touch the ground. "Imago." A reflection.

My soul is here, but the rest of me stayed behind.

Mega Gengar thrummed, pleased.

The stars that weren't stars flickered all around, and Ash recalled the last time he'd interacted with one in his dreams: a malevolent spirit. Mega Gengar remembered, too, and his humming turned to sinister whispering as his intentions grew hostile. Just the thought of that vile spirit that had tried to consume Ash last time drove him mad.

"Okay, calm down," Ash said. "Nothing's gonna get either of us so long as we stick together. Got it?"

Mega Gengar's doubt put a sour taste in Ash's mouth, and he had a queer thought: could souls taste? That was enough to rile Mega Gengar's crude sense of humor, and soon Ash was laughing out loud

with the Ghost. The sound drew some of the floating lights closer, their whispers beckoning.

"Fuck that," Ash said, regaining some of his composure. "I'm not fallin' for that again."

He tried flying and was relieved to find that he could move with nearly the same freedom as he did in the real world. Avoiding the sluggish specters was a simple enough task, and he began to explore.

This place was even more bizarre than he remembered in his dreams. Rivers flowed one way, but any debris in them flowed the opposite way. Waterfalls fell in every direction, crisscrossing like long city streets, and mountains peaked low while the deepest valleys stretched high into the heavens. But Ash flipped upside down, and suddenly the mountains were tall and the valleys low. There was no gravity in this place; the world did as it pleased, from the rocks to the rivers to the stars that were an arm's length away if he desired to fly close enough.

Like the portal he'd come through, there were others floating about, and Ash was fascinated to peer through them. Looking glasses floated aimlessly, old and spotted black, as if the haze sought to reclaim them. Some were gilded and huge, others could have fit in the palm of his hand. Others still were not mirrors at all, but pools of water, slowly rippling quicksilver. They reflected the starlight and crystal light like bright eyes caught in a glare, winking and blinking and following him as he passed. But within, he saw faces. There were children playing around a fountain throwing coins, a woman checking her makeup on the other side of the mirror, a Bouffalant stopping to drink at a watering hole. Everywhere he looked, it was a different face staring back, a different part of the world, a different occasion. He saw them all.

"Congratulations," Ash said to a young couple at the marriage altar as they recited their vows.

The bride turned to the elegant mirror mounted behind the priest and stared right at Ash, like she had heard him. Ash was so surprised when she locked eyes with him that he tried to scramble back to avoid being seen. Her image faded from the glass, and he was left staring at an ancient bronze mirror rusted and dulled over the ages.

Mega Gengar wanted to keep flying, so Ash obliged him. They hopped from portal to portal, and Ash began to understand.

"Those people, they're real," he said.

They were real, and Ash had a glimpse into their lives. "I can see anyone here," he said, awed.

He and Mega Gengar flew to a rocky inverted island, the crystals shimmering blue and green and indigo and sprouting from the rock on top of each other like weeds greedy for what little sunlight they could

snatch. A huge lake sat in the center of the floating crystal island, upside down but still as glass. Ash peered over the edge of it and reached up to touch the water. It parted from his fingers like fog, cool and dry.

"Lily," he pleaded. "Show me Lily."

The foggy waters swirled, and the shadows twisted into an achingly familiar shape. Lily was hunched over the edge of the water on the other side, so close he could have taken her hand. She was outside, the sun was low in the sky, and she was crying.

"Lily," he said, wondering where she was and why she was so upset. "Hey, don't cry. I'm here. I'm right here with you."

Lily rubbed her bandaged hand and sniffled. She stared down at her reflection, at Ash, like the whole world had fallen around her. "What if...I'm wrong?" she asked.

Her voice came to him in waves, near and far all at once. He pressed his face as close to the barrier between them as he could, wishing he could reach her for real. "Whatever's wrong, you'll solve it," he said. "You never give up. I love that about you, Lily."

She looked down at him, and in a strange moment of clarity, she saw him as the bride at her wedding had seen him. Lily's eyes grew large, and she leaned farther out over the edge of the water. "Ash?"

But the closer she leaned, the farther away she drifted. The fog descended and swallowed her voice and silhouette until there was nothing left. Ash lingered there a while, watching the swirling mists.

"Lily," he said. "I'm sorry..."

There was no answer, no one else here to hear his excuses, to offer solace or comfort or even a hand. He had never felt so close to stars and still so alone among them.

He and Mega Gengar drifted deeper into the expanse, catching glimpses of people and Pokemon living their lives, oblivious to his presence. To them, he was nothing but a shadow in the corner of their eye, a trick of the light, a spirit who did not belong among them.

A plain rectangular mirror showed a young woman brushing out her jet black hair. Her icy blue eyes were cold to look upon, and Ash saw her true nature as easily as he saw her: Crystallos. Someone was with her out of sight, a man. He spoke, but Ash couldn't make it out. Suddenly, another appeared through the mirror, dead eyes and blackened bones and hoarfrost. A Froslass rose up next to the woman and glared at the mirror. Ash was so startled at the Ghost's intense killing aura that Mega Gengar emerged from him without warning and pressed himself against the barrier. Froslass and the Crystallos woman shattered beyond the mirror, and Ash watched in disbelief as the mirror itself broke down. Its shards tumbled in the zero gravity space, dust in the wind.

"What the hell..." But Ash was left to wonder, both at the Crystallos woman and Mega Gengar's interference.

That Froslass...

There was something familiar about that woman, about them both, but he couldn't place it. Like a dream he couldn't quite remember, fuzzy. But he was sure he'd never seen either of them before this moment. Maybe it was this place, the endlessly looping eternity. Was time even real here? How much had passed on the other side? Had he drowned in the sink yet?

Ash forgot all these thoughts when at the next looking glass he saw the face of a man he never thought he'd see again. A writhing storm of disbelief and sheer joy made him abandon all caution and launch himself at the portal. He pounded against it with his shadowy fists, on the verge of tears he couldn't cry.

"Professor Oak!" he shouted. "Professor, it's me! It's Ash!"

Professor Samuel Oak was in his lab at his desk smoking a cigarette. He was younger than Ash remembered him being, his hair more brown than grey, but it had been so long since he'd seen him. His desk was a mess, littered with papers and more than a few coffee mug rings. He didn't seem to see Ash.

He's alive!

Ash could hardly believe it. He pounded on the barrier harder. "Professor Oak! It's Ash! Can't you hear me?"

Oak had bags under his eyes. He took a long drag of his cigarette, savoring the smoke. Ash could almost smell the tobacco, a sweet musty smell that was so nostalgic it hurt.

"Professor," Ash said again. "Look at me, Professor Oak..."

Oak was looking at something else on his desk, though. He wore a watch, an old gaudy gold number that Ash remembered.

"Gary broke that watch," Ash recalled. "He and Scyther were training, it was an accident..."

"Damnit, that's not right," Oak said, his voice echoing far away as if in a dream. "Maybe this Pokedex idea was a waste of time, after all..."

Ash watched him struggle with his work. He frowned deeply just like Gary would when he was particularly vexed. He was so young, too young.

"I get it," Ash said, his voice tremulous. "You're not real."

You're already dead.

Time did not touch this place, as it does not touch Ghosts. The dead have no use for time and its constraints on mortal flesh and bone.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" Ash asked Mega Gengar. "This loneliness... You feel it, too."

Oak blew smoke from his cigarette that clouded the picture of him,

but as he looked up he locked gazes with Ash, and for a moment, he saw.

Ash stared at the blank portal, but it would not open again. "He saw me," Ash said softly, afraid he imagined it. "He *saw* me."

He fisted his hair and pulled as hard as he could, but he felt no physical pain. There was only the loss, a part of him that would be forever missing, faded just as Oak's likeness had faded.

"Goddamnit," Ash said, pulling and pinching and tearing at himself. Still, he felt nothing. "Goddamnit! How can you stand it?"

Mega Gengar was strangely tranquil within him, waiting. Ash could hardly stand the pain in his heart, hollow and sucking and insatiable.

"Is it always like this for you?" he asked. "How long?"

The whispers in his ears made no sense, just white noise. No feeling, no warmth, no voice. He couldn't stand it.

"How long have you been like this? Answer me!"

Mega Gengar parted from him again and drifted onward, and Ash had no choice but to follow. It was not far. Another looking glass lingered in a crack in an inverted mountainside nestled between two blooming green crystals. It was a rift barely as wide as a man, a shard of glass corroded and smashed and long left to drift. Ash would not have even noticed it among the rest. He stopped before it and ran his fingers down the length of it, watching as the portal revealed its secrets.

"That man," he said, recognizing the vision Mega Gengar had shown him when they first began practicing Mega Evolution. "I saw him before."

He was broad of shoulder and smile alike, hirsute and homely. He laughed with his family. This scene was clearer than the one he'd seen before. They were gathered around a fire pit as a suckling Grumpig roasted on a spit. Ash could smell the roasting meat and hear the pop and sizzle of lard and honey dripping into the flames. The man was telling a story and pantomiming for his many children. He made shadow puppets with his hands in the firelight to amuse them, and when he laughed the sound filled the earthen room. It was an old room, Ash realized. Mud walls, a dirt floor, drafty. Their clothes were strange, ruffled and loose and layered, from another era. Like looking at a picture in the old history textbooks from his schoolkid days years ago. He didn't know why, but the happy family scene made him sad to look on.

"Who are they?" he asked.

Mega Gengar's only response was a somber sinking weight on his shoulders. The man was dancing with one of his younger children now, swinging her around as he hopped from foot to foot, his smile

wide and full. And Ash began to understand.

"I'm a Ghost," he said, recalling those few intelligible words the last time he'd seen this man and his family.

I'm...a Ghost...

The man kissed his daughter and set her back down, and Ash watched as all the children gathered around him to hear a story. The light drowned out their filmy shapes as it reclaimed them. Ash sank through the ether, unable to stay afloat anymore.

"That was your family," he said, his voice carrying to the ends of this place. "You had a family, once."

Mega Gengar's whispers were quiet now.

Then, this place is...

"Where the lonely ones go."

Ghosts, never seen or heard or felt, watching from the other side as the living lived on.

"Where I'll go one day."

Mega Gengar's smile was infectious, and Ash had the overwhelming urge to laugh even as the thought of spending eternity in this wondrous prison shattered what little was left of him.

"You were so happy when we met in Lavender Town," he said. "You were so happy you weren't alone anymore."

They sank deeper into space past the crown of an ancient petrified tree whose roots wended for miles through stone and crystal and shards of broken mirrors like an army of fat pale snakes. Some of the specter stars called to Ash as he passed, laughing or sobbing or screaming or taunting.

Ghosts, he thought. *They're all Ghosts. They're all trapped here, alone.*

Except for the ones that crossed over. The ones who found a way through. Holy ground in Lavender Town, or a child's once beloved doll cruelly discarded. Or a Medium in search of a fateful haunting.

"I don't know why you, or why me, specifically. But maybe that's not the right question to be asking. What matters is understanding the feeling behind it. "

He sank farther still, past rivers twisting through nothing but empty space and dead leaves falling toward the heavens above. The world was a blue kaleidoscope changing hues every time he blinked, gradually darkening.

"I get it now," Ash said. "It was never about me. It was about you."

He drifted toward a frozen pool amidst the thick of the gnarled tree roots and landed against it. It was different from the others, warm and wet. It was such a strange sensation after feeling nothing in here. The petrified roots that passed through it throbbed like veins full of blood, alive. He sank his fingers into the pool as the light parted, revealing murky blue waters. He could smell the forest, feel the

coolness of the water and the warmth of the summer sun.

I've been here before.

A boy struggled in the depths of the pool on the other side, unable to stay afloat.

"Gary?" Ash said, recognizing his childhood friend. But Gary was young, just a boy, and he was drowning.

Another dove in after him, and Ash had the most uncanny feeling of deja vu as he peered at the boy's rescuer. Little arms reached for Gary as he flailed, afraid.

"That's me," he said, incredulous. "I remember that day."

Another reached in to pull the boys out of the water, Gary and Daisy's nanny, Ash recalled. Sophie, that was her name. She and Delia would take the three of them to the lake on Route One in the summers to swim and picnic while Oak was working in his lab. He hadn't thought about her or those summers in so long.

Gary almost drowned that day.

Ash watched as Sophie pulled both boys out of the water, a dark denizen spying from the depths. Their shapes were blurry on the shore, and he pressed his face closer to see better.

I wish I could warn myself, he found himself thinking. *About all this, everything that's happened... I wonder if things coulda been different?*

Maybe Oak would still be alive.

His child self returned to the water and peered over the edge, curious. Ash stared back at his younger copy, a mere memory drifting in the undertow.

"You'll be okay, Ash," he reassured the boy he used to be. "It'll be hard, but you'll be strong. You'll have to be."

Ash the boy stared back at him, and Ash wondered if he could see him. What kind of paradox would that unlock? Would he drive himself mad?

The longer he looked, the less he saw the boy and the more he saw himself, staring up at him from the bottom of the lake, the summer sun warm on his cheek. And those eyes, red and sad and his. He was a boy again, wet from his swim in the lake, and he saw those red eyes in the deep, red just like his. Cold fingers of dread wrapped around his neck as gently as a lover's.

"I remember," he said, trembling. "Those eyes..."

Ash, Ash! His mother was calling him, but he would not budge from the shore, unable to look away as the dark waters stared back. They wrapped around him like hands, caressing and tugging and dragging him back, deeper.

Ash! Ash! Ash!

His mother's voice was gone though, and only an echo remained as he looked down at the drowning man, and those bleeding red eyes

that opened up to meet him.

"Ash..."

Ash couldn't move. He sank, unable to float or fly, and when he opened his eyes, he was not the little boy in his memory, but a spirit trapped in this twilight place beyond the mirror, and he was sinking.

"Who...?" His lips moved, but the words drifted somewhere far above, out of reach.

"Ash."

Me?

It was so cold at the bottom of the lake.

"I see you."

His body jerked violently, and he opened his eyes for real this time. He was not sinking, and the weight he felt was not stones in his pockets but the pale tree roots. They coiled about him like hungry worms scrambling after a hard rain, pulsing obscenely as they locked him in place. He was not sinking, and the deep was rising to meet him from below. Poisonous red eyes, murky in the darkness, watched him struggle. Ash screamed.

"No!" He struggled to free himself as a fear he'd once known came rushing back with the tide of memory.

Those eyes, he thought frantically. *I saw them that day.*

"Ash."

"Stay the fuck away from me, whatever you are!" he screamed.

Mega Gengar emerged, drawn out of the same trance Ash had been pulled into, and rose up like a nightmare given sentience. He bared his rotten teeth at the abyssal presence lurking in the deep where the throbbing roots were thickest, his third eye wide with sight.

"Mega Gengar!" Ash shouted, desperate. "Help me!"

Mega Gengar exploded in a cloud of noxious gas, but even that wasn't enough to dull the baleful red glow watching them from below.

"Ash..."

That voice wasn't Mega Gengar. It drowned everything out, even the Mega Ghost's psychotic rambling whispers. Ash could do nothing to block it out.

"Let me in."

Ash was struck with a terror so pure that he lost all notion of himself in those unblinking red eyes. It fell to Mega Gengar to unleash a jealous fury only a Ghost can truly accomplish and disrupt the silence with an explosive Sludge Bomb. The tar-like poison seeped into the tree roots binding Ash, eating away at them like acid. If not for his spirit form, Ash himself may have been reduced to pulpy poisonous goo, too. He wasted no time in struggling free as the sludge ran its course and dribbled into the darkness.

The glowing red eyes watched it all, and a wave of revulsion hit

Ash like a sour stench. He felt the overwhelming urge to retch, but without a flesh and blood body, he suffered only the spasms and the pain without the relief of release. It seemed to him that those bloody eyes were getting bigger. Or creeping closer.

"Let's get outta here!" he shouted for Mega Gengar.

The Ghost was glaring back at the powerful presence, either very bold or very stupid, but he retreated on Ash's command and rejoined him. As soon as they merged once more, Ash felt as though he'd climbed out of quicksand. He flew back up as fast as he could, but fast as he was, he couldn't outrun the encroaching tendrils of darkness that reached for him.

"Ash..."

"I said I'm not interested!" Ash shouted, desperate to get away from whatever the fuck that thing was.

The exit! Where's the exit?!

"There is no escape."

"Watch me, asshole!"

Ash willed Mega Gengar to fly them faster, higher. But in this place, up was down and down was death, or something far worse.

Wake up, he willed his body on the other side. *Wake up, wake up! Pull me outta this fucked up dream place!*

"You are the dream."

Floating specter stars obstructed his path, and he ripped and bludgeoned his way through them with Mega Gengar's Shadow Punch. They converged as one, commanded by forces unseen to stop him, to sink him. Great dark ribbons swept through the cosmos, smashing mirrors and slicing through waterfalls and mountains alike, carrying the presence ever closer to him.

"You found me so you wouldn't be alone, right?" Ash shouted at Mega Gengar. "Then don't let me die in here!"

Mega Gengar cackled at the challenge and brimmed with energy as he flew them up and away in a fresh burst of speed.

Ash, Ash!

He could hear his mother's voice again, calling out to him.

Ash, get away from there!

Her voice was in his head, all around him, everywhere at once, and he wished to all the gods that had abandoned this dreadful place to let him see her again.

"Ash, wake up!"

"Morty," Ash recognized the voice that emerged as his mother's faded. "Morty! Where are you?!"

"Let me in!"

The darkness opened up below Ash, and he dared not look back. He imagined teeth, a forked tongue, fire and brimstone, but there was

only the swirling dark void, opened wide to swallow him whole.

There! Ash saw the portal he'd come through, the sink in the safe house kitchen where his body remained. He reached for it as the nightmare gnawed at his heels.

"Ash!" Morty shouted, stricken.

Ash choked on water as he desperately tried to suck in air. He was flung back from the sink with such force that he fell into the kitchen table and landed hard on the floor, injuring his hip. Like landing in freezing water, all feeling returned to him in a shock of pain. He gagged and retched up water and bile and bits of stew from his dinner. How long ago had that been? Morty was in his pajamas, still the middle of the night.

"Ash, what the hell---" Morty began.

But all of a sudden, the sink water churned and exploded, soaking the counter and floor. Morty stared at the sink in disbelief. Ash scrambled to his feet, ignoring the nausea and his once-more throbbing head, and yanked the stopper from the basin to drain what water was left in the sink. Only when it was all gone down the drain did he heave and sink to the floor again, exhausted and shaking.

Mega Gengar crawled out of him, transforming as he emerged back into his regular form. Morty was staring at them both like he'd seen something much worse than a Ghost.

"Ash," he said, his voice tremulous and uncertain. "What the hell was that?"

"My dream," Ash said, shaking as the wet and cold began to seep into his bones.

Morty looked at him with sympathy and a little fear.

"Morty, I'm scared," he said in a small voice as he clutched his knees to his chest and tasted the acrid remains of his dinner on the back of his tongue. "I think...I need help."

Morty looked at him for the longest time, like he was deciding whether he believed him. Whether it was worth it. At long last, he nodded. "I think I might know who to ask."

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He woke from a dream, cold. The Furret hovel was dark and quiet. Not even the wind dared to disturb the tranquil stillness.

A dream, yes. It was not real.

Mewtwo had learned much and more from the creatures of the valley. In his dreams, he could see through their eyes. In dreams, he was infinite, unrestrained by the limitations of his frail body. He flew with Staraptor and swam with Whiscash, burrowed with Diglett and hunted with Houndoom. He saw the whole valley, the mountains and the forest and the moors, misty with fog and forgotten with the ages.

But every time he woke, his pain woke too. The hole in his head had healed well enough, but his arm was regenerating far too slowly. It would be weeks, perhaps months before his body was intact again. And now he knew he did not have months to spare. The disease was gone, but there was something far more dangerous coming for him.

He saw them through the eyes of others, making their way north, every day bringing them closer to his hovel, rats hungering after the scent of deliciously rotting meat. The humans had followed him here; they were not going to let him go.

Daughter of Dragons.

Mewtwo remembered her, the woman with sunshine in her hair and power far older than him in her bones. She had pitied him once, protested his confinement, and in the end she had walked away without doing anything to free him. Just like all the rest. Now, she was coming for him. Her, and another like her, old and powerful. Their bodies were mortal and malleable, but their shadows stretched long and bloody behind them, ravenous and proud. There was power in age, in a legacy older than the wind and the sand and time itself.

Let them come, Mewtwo thought, his anger building. *I'll show them why humans have not dared to set foot in these lands in a thousand years.*

Mewtwo closed his eyes again to dream, and he waited.

Lily's hand throbbed where she'd sliced it open. She and Lance were working on Mega Evolution again, but she still couldn't seem to get it quite right. He was off with Charizard now hunting for their dinner, and Lily was left alone with Ampharos to practice.

"What am I doing wrong?" she asked Ampharos.

He looked up from his grazing and watched her like a toddler might watch his fretting mother.

Lily sighed and sat down next to him. His body was rubbery but

soft, and she didn't mind his natural static. She was used to it with Pikachu. It popped on her skin like soap bubbles. Ampharos nudged her head with his nose, and Lily reached up to give him a pat.

"Maybe you don't want to Mega Evolve," she wondered. "Amphy, I never actually asked you."

Ampharos continued to look at her inquisitively. It was a cold day today. The sun was nowhere in sight in the grey sky that threatened snow. The moors glistened with hoarfrost, and Lily's exposed fingers ached with the cold. It seemed that every day grew colder and colder as they came closer to the place Mewtwo had landed. With each passing day, she wondered what they would eventually find, and she wasn't really looking forward to finding out.

"Lance says I'm doing this wrong. I'm missing something," Lily confided in the Light Pokemon. "But you and me get along super well, so it can't be that... Right, Amphy?"

Ampharos plucked a leaf stuck in Lily's hair and ate it. The crunching sound made her smile.

"I like you the way you are," she said. "You don't have to Mega Evolve to be strong. But I guess... I dunno, I thought you might like it. Lance said you used to be a Dragon once, just like Charizard." She looked up at Ampharos. "I wonder if you remember?"

Ampharos continued to ruminate as he watched her.

"Lance says he can remember," she said softly. "He says if I listen, I can remember, too. This..." She looked at her cut hand, the blood cold and coagulating. "This is the Old Blood. The blood of Dragons..."

"What you are is something to revere, not to shame. Anyone who makes you feel the lesser for it is not worthy of you."

Lily felt herself tear up a little remembering his moving words to her. "You know, Amphy? Lance was the first person to believe in me. All of me, I mean. This part..."

The part I never knew how to believe in.

Even Ash had never truly accepted her Titan heritage. She couldn't blame him after Charizard's death, and he had never held that against Lily despite her role in the tragedy. To him, she was just Lily, as precious to him as any of his friends and family, and he loved her just the way she was. But to Lance, she was so much more.

"What if...I want to be more?" she said. "Is that so wrong?"

"Even if you despise me, I cannot abide you despising yourself."

"Why couldn't we be more?"

Ampharos saw her looking up at him and bent to claim another pat on the head.

"It's not about control. It's a connection."

"A connection," Lily said. She got to her feet and clenched a fist. Blood seeped between her fingers to the ground. "Why shouldn't I feel

that connection with you?"

She unclenched her fist and held her bloody palm out to Ampharos. He watched her, his dark eyes dilated as he smelled her blood.

"A connection," she said again. "A connection needs two. Amphy, what do you want?"

Ampharos hesitated.

"It's okay," she said. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm not ashamed. Not anymore. So you choose, okay? I'll never break my promise not to control you. I swear it."

"It's not about control. It's a connection."

Lily smiled and reached for Ampharos, wanting to feel what he felt the way she'd felt Larvitar. When Ampharos reached back, the world all around them grew dim, and she trembled with the force of his emotions. Everything, anger and pain, sadness and joy, love and a fierce desire to protect, she felt it all at her fingertips. Them, and Ampharos's cold rubbery nose as he closed the gap between them.

He began to grow under her fingertips. She felt his transformation all the way down to her toes as if it were her changing, her opening up and letting go of it all, the excitement and the fear and the relief, like waking from a long and deep sleep to the sun shining above. Rubbery skin pebbled and layered in fine sharp scales, so tiny and tightly packed that no human blade could hope to draw blood from them. Ampharos's wool grew in magnificent bolts and curls, a crown of thunderclouds that tumbled down his back and engulfed his tail. The draconian energy he took from Lily manifested in pulsing crimson pearls in his wooly mane and tail, teeming with power. Red static coated him like a fine silken veil. Mega Ampharos pulsed with pride and excitement, and the sight of him filled Lily with a warmth that not even the northern winds could extinguish.

"Mega Ampharos," she said, hardly able to believe her eyes. "You really are a Dragon!"

And like any true Dragon, Mega Ampharos threw back his head and roared. The grey skies parted for the megavolt of lightning he summoned, and the heavens rumbled with thunderous adulation. He was happy, so happy that he finally remembered what he had been so long ago, a relic of the days when Dragons ruled the earth awakened by his connection with a girl who was finally beginning to remember, too.

Lily laughed through her tears. Connecting with Larvitar had opened her eyes; connecting with Mega Ampharos filled them with sight. She could see it, the power Lance had spoken of.

It's so beautiful. He's beautiful.

Mega Ampharos was radiant with it, and he had the urge to test its

limits.

"Okay, Amphy!" Lily said, wiping her tears. "Let's try a Dragon Pulse!"

Mega Ampharos took to the skies with the aid of his powerful hind legs. He was swifter, taller, stronger than before, and the scarlet bolt of energy he released cleaved earth and tree and river with a ferocity that could have humbled any Dragonite. He was like a different Pokemon, so alive and full of hope and pride. She had never seen him like this in his mellower regular form.

"Amazing!"

Mega Ampharos landed in a flurry of red static that melted the hoarfrost and evaporated the water right out of the grass.

"You finally did it."

Lily whirled and found Lance dismounting from Mega Charizard. He had a sack over his shoulder, bloody with the day's kill. They both approached. Mega Charizard snarled as he caught Mega Ampharos's scent, and the two Dragons eyed each other. Lily could feel Mega Ampharos's fierce pride swell at the thought of a challenger.

"Lance!" Lily said, happier to see him than she'd ever been.

Before he could get a word out in his defense, she ran to him and threw her arms around him in a hug. He dropped the sack to catch her on instinct, and she laughed.

"You were right," she said. "You were right about everything. The connection and Amphy and our inheritance, I get it. I think I really get it now!"

He was so surprised that he managed only an eloquent, "Oh."

Lily was all smiles and tears of joy at the confused, lost look on his face.

"Everything good that's happened to me out here is because of you," she said, the words spilling out of her. "I know it probably doesn't mean much to you, but I want you to know I don't despise you. I never did. You changed my life, Lance. I don't even know how to thank you."

He maintained his silence even now, and she realized that he probably wasn't used to such an effusive reaction. Cold, distant, and taciturn, that was his tempo. Even his arms were stiff around her waist.

Mega Charizard roared and snorted black smoke as he stood tall before Mega Ampharos, who was smaller but quicker on his feet than his fellow Dragon. The two were facing off like cocksure duelers, each waiting for the other to take the first shot. The mood was ruined when Pikachu ran to Mega Ampharos's side and began sparking.

"ChuChu, no! It's dangerous!" Lily said, running to intercept the plucky rodent.

"It's fine," Lance said. "Mega Charizard's strong. You'll need all the help you can get if you want to best him."

Lily gaped at him. "Was that a *challenge*?"

Lance tossed the sack of meat by their camp and went to Mega Charizard's side. The black Dragon snarled blue fire and began to salivate when Lance touched a hand to his long neck.

"An Elite Four is required to respond to any earnest challenge in defense of her title," Lance said. "You weren't aware?"

Lily was taken aback at his audacity and thrilled at the prospect of a friendly scrimmage against Lance. She could feel Mega Ampharos's electrifying excitement, eager to test this newfound power.

"You're serious," she said.

"You can always forfeit."

She grinned. "Not a chance. You're on!"

Lance tapped Mega Charizard's neck, and he launched into the air, a black and blue smear on the darkling sky. Before Lily knew what was happening, the match had begun and Mega Charizard let loose with a sapphire Flamethrower. Pikachu squealed and jumped from her arms to land next to Mega Ampharos, who began to spark violently.

"Double Thunderbolt!" Lily shouted.

Together, they generated an electric surge so powerful that the ground cracked beneath them. A wicked lightning bolt carved the sky and came down like an executioner's blade over Mega Charizard, colliding with the blue Flamethrower in a dazzling display of pyrotechnics. Mega Charizard flew to safety through the smoke, but Mega Ampharos was already glowing red in the beginnings of his next attack.

"Too slow," Lance said.

Lily laughed. "You're gonna eat your words! Let's go, Amphy!"

They sat together under the stars that night. The sky had cleared a little, and behind the rolling grey clouds, the moonlight cast silver kisses on the frosted moors and still lakes. She was in a good mood. She hadn't stopped smiling since he returned and she had Mega Evolved Ampharos. He flexed his fingers. The stiffness in his hands was uncomfortable, but he said nothing of it.

"There's gotta be something I can do for you," Lily said. "I know you said you didn't offer to teach me about Dragons to get something in return, but still."

"I can't think of anything you could possibly do for me."

She shoved him playfully in the ribs. "Hey, just 'cause you're, like, the strongest Titan ever doesn't make you perfect."

"It doesn't?"

She tried to shove him again, but he avoided her elbow this time. "Ha ha, very funny."

They lapsed into a short but comfortable silence, until inevitably she broke it.

"I've been thinking a lot lately," she said. "Mostly about being in this place, how it feels like living in another world almost. Like, another life, even. Do you ever feel that way? Being here, I mean, with me?"

Lance flexed his stiff fingers. She had been small in his arms. Everything about her was small. Except her mouth. She opened it again to draw him out of his thoughts.

"Lance?"

"My old life ended on Shamouti Island," he said. "This is the only life I have now."

"Oh, um... Right, that makes sense." She turned her gaze skyward. Her Dragonair was wrapped around her with his head in her lap, silver and sapphire in the moonlight.

Lance leaned back on his hands and followed her gaze up. Even with the clouds, there were so many stars out that it never truly got dark here. Odd for a place so far away from the world they had both known before to be so open and full of light and still so lonely.

"This is a strange place," he said. "A strange life... Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"Earlier." He clenched and unclenched his stiff fingers. "You said you never despised me."

"I thought we agreed that I'm the world's worst liar," she teased.

When he said nothing, her smile fell.

"I meant it," she said with quiet conviction. "I could never despise you."

"Even after what I did to you."

"Yes."

"Even though I killed Ash Ketchum's Charizard."

She didn't falter. "I killed your Dragonite. I regret the violence every day, but it was war between us then."

"I would have gone through with it," he said. "Lugia, Team Rocket, all of it. I would never have stopped if you hadn't stopped me."

"But I did stop you."

"You failed to kill me. In the end, you couldn't truly stop me."

At this, Lily's conviction faltered. "But that's..."

"...Different?"

"Yeah. It's different."

"How is it different? You and I are still here, pursuing a legendary beast with the power to destroy the world. What's changed?"

"I've changed," she insisted. "And so have you."

"Why is that the only way you can see the world?"

Lance looked at her and wondered where her smile had gone. "Have I?"

"Why are you doing this? Are you trying to ruin our last few days together or something?"

"I'm sorry, Lance. I'm so sorry things happened the way they did. I wish it had all been different. I wish..."

He winced at the bitter taste in his mouth. What was wrong with him? Why was he ruining a perfectly adequate night? She had been so happy earlier.

"Lance, please, just... I know we're getting close to Mewtwo, and we don't have a lot of time left, so..."

"So?" He hardly heard himself speak, like he was watching it all happen from somewhere far away.

"So..." Lily said, hugging her knees to her chest. "Don't waste it. This time we have together... I want to enjoy it. It's like...like another world. Another life. I just want to remember..."

Lance followed her gaze skyward, where the stars fought to be seen behind the tumbling grey clouds that threatened snow. He wondered what she saw in them. "Tell me what you remember."

She smiled to herself. "Once, we met in a forest. There was no one else around, and we were lost together."

He said nothing as he tried to picture it.

"Or maybe out at sea. We were stationed on a research vessel, the only two people for a thousand miles in every direction. Just the endless ocean..."

He said nothing and let her dream.

"Maybe we knew each other our whole lives," she said, smiling. "Maybe we grew up together, and we were always close. Maybe..."

Maybe.

"Maybe we lived a thousand lifetimes before this, and every time we found each other. Somewhere along the way, sooner or later, no matter who we were or how long it took."

He glanced at her and was surprised at her silent tears. Not because he hadn't expected her sincere sadness, but because it moved him to sadness just witnessing it. A heat in his chest, coiled and angry, a subtle sickness he couldn't swallow.

"I like that," she said, smiling as she wiped her tears. "I really like that."

A thousand lifetimes of meeting, and a thousand partings to end them. With Lily, it was their partings he remembered the most, her voice calling his name, reaching for him, the tidal abyss dragging him under as her face was the last he ever saw, even now.

His fingers ached. Amber eyes, glazed with his reflection, stared back at him in question, then and now and a thousand times before.

And as before, this encounter too would end in parting. But he let her keep her smile and her wishes and dreams, and she let him keep his silence. A lovely lie, merciful and sweet, and at least for now, theirs to keep.

She began to dread the dawn. Each new day brought them closer to the end, and Lily had never been so unsure about anything in her life. How could she go back to her life at Indigo Plateau knowing the world that awaited her if only she chose to stay? Never had she imagined herself having to consider such a significant decision.

There's nothing to decide. I have to go back.

She wanted to see Ash again, her friends, her colleagues. She wanted to take Surge up on his offer to help her out with Ampharos's and Pikachu's Electric attacks. She wanted to listen to Chuck's ribald japes over dinner and laugh until her sides hurt. She wanted to feel Ash's arms around her.

But she wanted so much more than that, too. There was so much more than her work, her friends, her old life. There was more to her. She was more, and Lance had shown her that. She had been so wrong.

He walked ahead of her up a hill toward the setting sun, Kommo-o tolling ominously beside him with every step. The collar of his fur-lined cloak hid all but the ends of his unkempt red hair, and he seemed to her a specter, a mere figment she had dreamed up in her wanderings. If she called out to him, would he hear her?

He felt her gaze on his back and stopped to wait for her at the top of the hill. Neither of them spoke what little yet lay ahead, about what awaited them, what they might find and what might find them. There was nothing more to say. She wondered what he was thinking when he stayed up late into the night counting stars beside her, just an arm's length out of reach. Did he dread the dawn as much as she did?

"That forest," he said, indicating the vast expanse of murky pine ahead. "Mewtwo landed somewhere in there."

Lily gazed down at the rolling forest, almost black in the waning light. It stretched on for miles and rose with the distant foothills, bearding the western mountains in green. It was quiet and still---no birds calling or Bugs singing, no hunters prowling or prey running.

"I don't like this place," she said, hugging Pikachu to her chest.

Lance's expression was hard as he gazed out over the dark forest. "No."

"Maybe, um, we could make camp here for tonight? Start out again at first light."

Kommo-o's gilded scales clanged softly with every subtle movement. He watched the forest intently, as though waiting for something to reveal itself.

He doesn't like this place, either, Lily thought.

Pikachu squeaked and nuzzled Lily's neck for warmth.

"Not here," Lance said. "It's too exposed." He indicated a recess in the rocky hill. "There."

They hiked their way down, and they soon realized that what Lance had seen was no natural recess in the earth, but a crater. It had filled with water from a nearby lake, but it was devoid of fish and partially frozen over. Lance looked at it in silence.

"Lance?" Lily asked. "What's wrong?"

"This is fresh," he said. "Something landed here."

Lily felt her pulse quicken.

He looked back at the forest. "We should sleep in shifts tonight."

Mewtwo, Lily thought, following Lance's gaze to the forest. *Are you in there? Are you still alive?*

She hoped no harm had come to Mewtwo. He was severely injured and weak from the disease's ravaging effects. Exposed to the elements out here for so long, there was no telling what condition he was in. Lily shivered at the thought, suddenly sad. She set to work building a fire to keep her mind off it.

They had a blaze going soon enough and leftovers from lunch to fill their stomachs. The two Dragonair were out of their Pokeballs keeping watch as Lance and Lily ate in silence. Lily could not stop thinking about what would happen when they came face to face with Mewtwo. Would he attack? Would he listen to reason?

He didn't seem open to reason when he blew up Mt. Cinnabar, she thought grimly.

The sky had been grey all day, and finally tonight it could hold in the snow no longer. They were halfway through dinner when the first flakes began to fall, cold and white and each as large as the palm of Lily's hand. She had never seen snowflakes so fat and fluffy before. Everything in this world was out of proportion, or perhaps it was her who didn't fit. She wondered if Ash would ever believe her when she told him about this place, the hunt for Mewtwo, Lance.

Should I tell him?

She had not considered this. If she breathed a word about Lance to anyone, no doubt it would start an international manhunt until he was found and paraded all over Blackthorn. No doubt Clair would give him the most ostentatious and drawn-out trial she could to lay bare every sordid detail of his treachery to the world---treachery, of course, to which she and the other Blackthorn Titans had never been party.

But they would have to find him first. And even if they did, they would have to subdue him. Lily remembered the way he commanded Lugia, a legendary Pokemon so ineffably powerful that most thought it could be nothing more than myth and fantasy.

No, she thought as she watched him pull up the hood of his cloak

to protect himself from the falling snow. *She could send all of Blackthorn after him, but none of them would ever defeat him. He's the Champion.*

He would always be the Champion, and no formalities or loopholes would ever change that.

He felt her gaze and looked over. "Lily."

She shivered and inched closer to the fire. Her own hat was in her bag, so she dug it out, shook out her long hair, and pulled it down over her ears. "Sorry, I was just spacing."

Whether he believed her or not, he accepted her explanation and let it go. "This snow is ill-timed," he said. "We'll have a harder time navigating the forest tomorrow in the snow drifts if it doesn't let up."

Lily had never much cared for snow, having grown up on a volcanic island where every day was summer. "We could Fly on Mega Charizard," she suggested.

"No," he said. "If Mewtwo is as powerful a Psychic as you say, he may already know we're coming. Best not to paint a target on our backs."

Lily frowned. She did not relish the thought of hiking through the snow and suffering wet boots all day. But it appeared as though she would have no choice.

The Dragonair did not appreciate the snow one bit and hummed mournfully at its falling. They circled the fire, tails entwined. Lance watched them with a grim expression.

They're nervous, she thought. *Something about this snow doesn't sit well with them.*

Lily got up, her appetite forgotten, and walked toward the edge of the crater. Pikachu followed and climbed to her shoulder, shaking the snow from her fur and sneezing. Lily gazed down at the jagged hole in the earth, filled with water and frozen over with a thin layer of ice. The snowy skies blocked out all the stars and moon, and the world was dark save for their campfire. It was nearly impossible to tell where the trees ended and the night sky began, as if she stood on the precipice of some endless black crevasse. She was reminded of the bottomless crag Larvitar had fallen into, how she'd nearly lost her footing and tumbled all the way down.

"What is that?" she said. "A light?"

Somewhere in the woods, she saw glimmers of light, like moonlight on ice. They faded in and out, and she surmised that whatever they were, they were moving. Pikachu huddled against her cheek, searching for warmth.

"Did you say something?" Lance said.

"Yeah, I thought I saw..." Lily trailed off. It was hard to see anything in this thick snowfall.

There was a another flash of silver light in the distance followed by the crunching of gravel and stone, and suddenly Lily was looking not at the dark forest but at Dragonair's Protect shield, rippling sapphire light. The air grew so cold and brittle that it seemed she had inhaled a thousand shards of broken glass, raking the wet flesh of her throat. She gasped, but no sound came out.

A shaft of pale winter light collided with Dragonair's Protect forcefield, freezing the very air around them. Lily watched, breathless, as the beam warped and grew into an icy maw, hungry and huge. Blistering teeth opened wide to swallow Dragonair whole. Lily didn't have a voice to scream.

Wind gusted, and the next thing she knew, she was being dragged back as her throat throbbed with a sudden searing heat. A dripping column of flames descended on the sentient ice teeth, slathering them with orange tongues. Lance had her by the waist and turned his back on the heat as she clung to his fur-lined vest.

"Lance!" she choked out.

"Move," he said, releasing her.

He didn't need to tell her twice. Dragonair and Pikachu flanked her, the former having narrowly escaped death's jaws thanks to Charizard. Lily released Ampharos, Omastar, and Dodrio, not taking any chances. Lance released all his Pokemon and was already on his way to Mega Evolving Charizard in a matter of seconds. Their camp lay abandoned behind them, the dinner fire a sad smoking pile of embers fast disappearing under the smothering snowflakes that continued to rain down upon them with an almost vengeful persistence.

Lily was fumbling with the hunting knife strapped to her thigh when Kommo-o unleashed a barrage of Clanging Scales at the forest. They sliced through wood and stone alike, and something else that shrieked with inhuman pain and made Lily see double. She had the violent urge to throw up all of a sudden, as though an invisible hand had reached inside her and wrung her innards.

Psyhics, she thought, trembling in fear. *Mewtwo, is it you?*

"Fire Blast!" Lance shouted from high above.

He had mounted Mega Charizard, and the black Dragon rained down blue hellfire that incinerated the snowflakes and permafrost along the tree line. In the eerie blue light, Lily could see shadows, no longer silhouetted in moonlight.

"Glalie," she said, recognizing the snarling demon faces floating in the darkness. "They're causing the snow!"

There had to be at least twenty of them, and no two looked quite the same. Some speculated that Snorunt discarded the furs and skins they wore in favor of the skulls of people or Pokemon who perished in

the wilds and grew into them, thus evolving into Glalie. Each floating face was unique, some grinning in the spectral blue light, others frozen mid-scream with their huge jaws hanging open, cracked and dislocated. Necrotic black skin and blanched bone covered in frost, they were a ghastly sight to look upon. Dragonair and Dodrio liked them even less.

But the Glalie were not the true threat. Among their ranks hiding in the trees, Lily counted at least five Jynx. A sixth was pinned to a tree, impaled by Kommo-o's Clanging Scales and severed nearly in half at the waist. Her entrails were grey and frozen in the cold. The Jynx's frostbitten skin was bruised nearly black and drawn taut over brittle bones, and their fleshy hands glowed blue with Psychic power as they manipulated Glalie's ice and now Mega Charizard's fire. The flames parted for the advancing Glalie and lashed out in vengeful pennons to ground Lance and Mega Charizard.

"I have to stop the Jynx," Lily said. "But I have to get past the Glalie somehow..."

Lance's Lapras was swimming in the lake among the ice deflecting Ice Beams away from Kommo-o and the pink Dragonair as they worked together to take out as many Glalie as they could. An idea formed.

"Amphy, ChuChu! Double Thunder! Aim for the fire!" Lily commanded.

Her Pokemon obeyed, erupting with yellow light in all directions. Lily climbed on Dodrio's back and hauled Omastar up with her on her lap.

"Let's go, Dody!"

Dodrio took off with three squawks, and Omastar clenched his tentacles around Lily's arm in a fright, uneasy about the jerky movement. Dragonair was hot on Dodrio's heels. The Thunder attacks spooked the Glalie and Jynx for a few seconds, and it was all the opening Lily needed. She reached for Lapras.

"Lapras! I need a bridge to the other side!"

Lily felt Lapras respond to her pull, the fear and distress of being at the center of chaos without Lance there to guide her. It made it easier for Lily to connect and direct, and Lapras let loose with a combination of Hydro Pump and Frost Breath. The combined water and ice created a crude but sturdy bridge, and Dodrio clawed her way up and across right over the Glalie's disembodied heads. The pink Dragonair sang, and she joined Lily's Dragonair in following Dodrio across.

Dodrio landed in the scorched snow, missing a falling ribbon of fire only by the grace of her quick feet. The Jynx turned their dead faces on Lily and her motley band of Pokemon and wiggled their hips as they generated a telekinetically-powered Blizzard.

"Nauty, go! Stone Edge!"

She dropped Omastar to the ground, and he began to spin faster and faster, grinding the snow to slush and the earth beneath it to dust. His momentum launched him into the air at high speed, and he headed straight for the nearest Jynx, glowing white.

Dodrio spooked as the winds turned icy against her, but the two Dragonair were there ready to help with twin Dragon Rages. They shot off like bloody snakes into the trees, felling every trunk they hit and forcing the Jynx to Teleport or be crushed. The assault disrupted their Psychic attacks and broke their formation, and chaos ensued.

Omastar flew through the space where one Jynx had been standing just a moment before Teleporting to safety, when another Teleported nearby and received a hard and fast Stone Edge to the back. Together, they collided with a falling tree and were crushed beneath it.

"Nauty!" Lily screamed.

Dodrio shrieked and jumped onto one of the disoriented Jynx and tore into her cold deadened flesh with all three Drill Pecking beaks. A blast of fire warmed Lily's back, and she turned to see Lance and Mega Charizard swooping and cutting through Glalie's snow storm like the cold didn't affect them. His presence bolstered Kommo-o, who ran at full tilt at the nearest Glalie and shattered its skull body with Sky Uppercut.

But the tide of battle turned just as suddenly and violently as the bitter winds. Dodrio suffered a direct hit from an Ice Beam and went down hard, throwing Lily off in the process. Lily rolled in the snow and landed on her back, and she rolled again just in time to avoid death by conflagration as a blue fire pennon slammed into the ground where she'd been lying just a moment ago. Her sleeve caught fire, and a lancing pain erupted down her dominant left arm. Panicking, she smothered her burning arm with her weight in the snow, but the blue Dragonfire was hotter than normal fire and incinerated her sleeve and the skin beneath. The pain was demonic, and she screamed.

Omastar's hard spiky shell had saved him from the force of the falling tree, and he slowly burrowed free covered in the dead Jynx's congealed black blood. Another Jynx caught him in her Psychic attack and he went flying, this time at Lily and Dodrio, the latter of whom was squawking in agony on the ground as the Ice Beam's lingering effects ate into her bones past the mat of thick downy feathers.

Lily saw it at the last second and flung herself at Dodrio to protect her without a care for her own safety. Omastar grazed her burned arm, knocked her around, and spilled her blood on Dodrio and the dirty snow below. Lily landed hard on Dodrio, her entire left arm a bloody burning ruin of elemental pain, and saw stars.

A red glare flashed out of the corner of her eye, and suddenly the

two Dragonair were there Dragon Tailing Glalie like soccer balls. Lily's Dragonair was bleeding from a gash in his side. It was so cold, she couldn't even move her tongue to call out to him.

The snow fell down on her like hands heavy on her shoulders, burying her in oppressive wet cold, and Lily opened her mouth in a soundless whimper. And suddenly it stopped as dark wings enveloped her, and she heard a voice. There was a spark in the darkness, blue and then red.

So much blood, she thought.

It took her a moment to realize that it wasn't the winds she was hearing, but the Glalie's howling, lost and sad, and suddenly silent. The night sky pulled away, and she saw the moon. Then, she was rising.

"Lily," Lance said, holding her up. "Lily, can you hear me?"

Her head lolled against his chest, and suddenly she could hear him. She could smell him---pine and smoke and blood, and all she wanted to do was stay there safe in his arms. Then feeling returned, and she cried out in agony.

"Hold still," he said, strangely calm.

It had stopped snowing.

Why did it stop?

He was doing something, but time blurred like the swirling grey clouds overhead. They were disappearing, she realized, and with them her pain also began to fade a little. She was no longer cold, but hot. Too hot. She buried her face in Lance's shoulder and tried to ignore the knife he was using to cut away her burned sleeve.

Lance laid her back against something blessedly cool. When he touched her left arm, she cried out again and her throat clenched up.

"Be still," he said. "It will hurt less. The Super Potion should be working by now."

She breathed harshly through her teeth and willed herself to do as he bade her, counting down from one hundred and telling herself he would be finished before she got to zero. He finished at thirty-four, and she was sure she'd passed out somewhere along the way.

"Lance," she said, swallowing her nausea as best she could. "The Glalie..."

"Are all dead," he said mechanically. "The Jynx, too, thanks to your efforts."

She tried to sit up, and Mega Charizard growled over her. She was leaning against his flank, but it was the dark forest that preoccupied him. What was left of it. The two Dragonair had decimated nearly an acre's worth of it in their Dragon Rage. Lily could make out the dashed heads of a few Glalie and a Jynx carcass maimed and quartered nearly beyond recognition amidst the ruin. Then she

remembered her Pokemon.

"Dody, she was frozen!" she exclaimed, looking around.

"Mega Charizard melted the worst of the damage," Lance said. "She'll survive."

Dodrio was on her side. Her six eyes were dilated with fear and pain, and she squawked feebly when she saw Lily looking. Nearby, Omastar was crawling over the frozen ground. His shell was charred and missing a few spikes, but he seemed otherwise unharmed despite the rough treatment from Jynx's Psychic pummeling. There was blood on his shell, and Lily, queasy, wondered if it was hers.

The thought of her left arm drew her eyes to it, and she saw that Lance had bound it as best he could in cloth from his cloak. An empty Super Potion shot lay discarded on the ground. She wasn't bleeding, but through the breaks in the crude bandage, Lily could see glimpses of her ruined arm, flayed and burned and raw.

"Thank you," she said, sniffling. "For Dody, and for me."

"If you hadn't taken out all the Jynx, you wouldn't have cause to thank me," he said.

I did that?

He didn't give her time to wonder at the rare compliment and rose to his feet. "It's as I suspected. Mewtwo knows we're here."

"What? But that's..."

"This was a warning. Perhaps he thought a little snow and ice would be enough to deter us."

The way he said it, filled with poisonous disdain, sounded half a challenge. Lily got to her feet on knobby knees and tried not to crumple back to the ground. "Lance, Mewtwo's probably afraid of us. He thinks humans are evil, and I can't blame him after what he went through on Cinnabar. We have to be careful about how we approach him."

Ampharos, Pikachu, and Kommo-o were picking through the dead Glalie making sure none would rise again. Pikachu heard Lily's voice and abandoned the task to run to her side.

"It's too late for careful," Lance said. "If it's a fight he wants, then it's a fight he'll get."

"What? No, we're not here to fight him. That was never my intention!"

He looked at her like he didn't know her. "Intention? Look around you. Mewtwo doesn't care what your intentions are. Did he ever?"

Lily hesitated, and he noticed.

"This is about survival," he said. "A creature born in a lab and raised into slavery would know little else."

"That's not fair," Lily protested, her anger rising.

"No," Lance agreed. "But it's life. Ours or his. If you're not prepared

to make a difficult decision, then turn back now."

"What? No way! I can't just leave you. Mewtwo's too strong."

"Lugia was strong, too."

"That's not the same thing."

"You're right, it's not. Against Lugia, I was alone. But now, I have you. So choose: turn back now, or stay with me."

Lily's arm ached, and she clutched it to her side. He watched her with that same impassive chill like he didn't care one way or the other. But he knew what he was doing, what his words meant to her. He had to know, after everything.

Damn you, she thought. *Goddamn you.*

"I'm not leaving you," she said softly. "But you already knew that."

He looked at her. "There is always a choice, Lily. In everything we do, no matter how impossible the choice may seem, the fact remains that we always have a choice. And we are bound to live with the consequences. There is no middle ground."

Lily got the feeling they weren't talking about Mewtwo anymore. Before she could come up with an answer for him, he turned toward the forest.

"Mewtwo is waiting," he said.

He stalked off before she could even respond, and she was left with her Pokemon at the edge of the forest. With no choice, Lily recalled Dodrio and Omastar, and she trudged after Lance with Dragonair, Ampharos, and Pikachu in tow.

The forest was dark and cold. Frosted leaves crunched underfoot, and the sentinel pines shivered in the wind around Lily.

"Deathly quiet," she said, her breath misting as she walked. This place gave a whole new meaning to the phrase. There was a damp heavy darkness in the moonlit air that she had never known, ominous and patient, lying in wait. It was the sensation of fingers brushing the back of her neck, the cold curling the ends of her hair, shadows moving just out of sight. Ampharos's light illuminated the path ahead, but shadows ate away at the edges like greedy tongues.

Lance walked ahead, Kommo-o and the pink Dragonair at his sides. Kommo-o's scales chimed, but even so they did little to disturb the thick silence of this place. Hours they walked, or so it seemed. The trees they passed looked the same, the dark sky above ever unchanging. Even the snow ahead of her was churned and chewed up from Lance and Kommo-o's movements, or could they be going in circles?

Lily's toes were numb with cold, and the wetness had begun to seep in through her soles. Her fingers ached in her gloves, but from the cold of the night or the heat of Charizard's burn, she couldn't quite tell anymore. Every step she took seemed like it might be the last she

could take, and yet she took another, and another, and another, her eyes ever on Lance's back just ahead.

Except he wasn't just ahead anymore. Somehow, he'd wandered on and left her behind a ways.

"Lance," she called to him, "wait for me."

He didn't wait, didn't turn, and continued into the darkness.

"Lance, wait!" she said a little louder. Maybe he hadn't heard her? Her voice sounded so small and tinny...

Why would he wait for you? she heard her own voice in her head. *What could you ever offer him?*

Lily frowned at the thought and pressed on. "Lance!"

He can't hear you, she thought. *He won't wait for you. You're chasing a figment.*

She stumbled forward, panting with the exertion, and reached the edge of Ampharos's halo of guiding light. Lance was little more than a flicker in the shadows now, melting into the forest.

"Wait," Lily gasped, her throat clenched in pain from the cold and exhaustion. "Please, wait..."

No, came her voice again, a whisper at the edges of the shadows around her. *You're not good enough. You're nothing but a fraud.*

"No, I... Lance!"

She couldn't see him anymore, couldn't see the ground below her anymore. Ampharos's light was gone, faded behind her, and there was only the gloom of the woods, cold with the encroaching winter shadows. How had she ended up here?

He left you to die. Just as you once left him to die.

Lily's eyes filled with tears that froze on her cheeks. "No, I would never..."

You did. You took everything from him. Why would he help you?

She trudged forward another leaden step. "Because h-he believes in m-me," she gasped through chattering teeth. "He s-said so."

He lied.

She tripped over a buried tree root and fell on her hands and knees in the snow. Somewhere along the way, it had begun to snow again, thick and suffocating. She could feel the huge flakes hitting her back and head like hands, open-palmed, pushing her down. "No," she sobbed. "H-He wouldn't... Not to me."

Especially to you. To control you. It's all he knows.

Lily felt the cold's oppressive weight on her back, piling high and suffocating her. She tasted snow on her tongue, in her mouth, swallowed it and choked on it. And it was dark, so dark. If she closed her eyes, she might waste away quietly. It would be peaceful, and the pain would fade. She could rest. It would be so easy.

Forget him. Just go to sleep and forget him. He can't control you

anymore.

Control, that was what it always came back to with him. Control was a Titan's power, her power and his. Control had summoned Lugia, had killed Ash's Charizard, had nearly killed Lance himself. It had stopped those rampaging Tyranitar, coerced the fearful Larvitar, Mega-Evolved Ampharos.

No, Lily thought suddenly, clearly, the voice loud in her ears and reaching her toes. *No, that's not what happened.*

It was hard to move with the weight of all that snow on top of her. She was buried at the bottom of a dark place, somewhere forgotten, alone in a graveyard of her own.

I'm not alone, she vowed, holding on to that thought, clear as a bell.

You are, her voice insisted somewhere far away. *You're all alone.*

No, Lily thought, struggling to push herself up.

In the corners of her vision, a light bloomed.

"I'm not alone!" she shouted as loudly as she could.

The light erupted, and the snow falling around her caught fire and fizzled out with a scream, a thousand tiny voices extinguished. Except there was no snow, she wasn't buried, and Ampharos and Pikachu and Dragonair surrounded her, ready to protect her from whatever skulked in the shadows. Ampharos's light was blindingly bright, impossible to ignore. It seemed to light up the whole forest, including the figure ahead, hunched and shaking on the ground.

"Lance!" Lily gasped at the sight of him out of sorts.

He was clutching his head in his hands and breathing heavily, as if waiting for a dizzy spell to pass. Charizard and Kommo-o and the pink Dragonair snapped and snarled and searched the shadows for danger, but there was nothing there.

Lily got to her feet, and sobering pain flared up and down her left arm. She gritted her teeth to it as she made her way to Lance's side. He flinched when she laid her hand on his shoulder. His dark eyes were wide and dilated, and for a moment he seemed not to recognize her.

"Lance," Lily said, taking his face in her hands. "It's me."

Then, as if waking from a particularly harrowing nightmare, he slowly regained himself and stared up at her. He closed a hand around her burned one, gentle as could be so as not to cause her further pain, and removed her from him. So close, his eyes could not hide what his words didn't say.

"It's okay," she said. "It's over. We're still together."

He took a moment to collect himself. He was so pale and shaken, like she'd never seen him before. He released her hand. "A delusion," he said hoarsely.

"Mewtwo."

"You broke it." He let the question hang.

"I don't think so. He just...let me go when he realized I knew." She braved a smile for him. "I knew it wasn't you."

"It's not about control. It's a connection."

Mewtwo could never have known.

Lily's Dragonair hummed nervously. Lance regained his bearings, and soon he was back on his feet and looking grimly determined.

"He's afraid," he said. "Using telepathy and visions to avoid a true confrontation."

"He's still hurt from before, so..." Lily said.

"Let's go."

He set off again, and this time Lily kept up at his side. Together, flanked by their Pokemon, they made their way deeper into the heart of the forest.

Mewtwo could smell them now, through the noses of the Furret and Sentret hiding in the underbrush. Their huge brown eyes were wet and dark, unblinking, and their noses twitched with the stench of danger and death. The shadows his pursuers cast lingered behind them, reaching into the forest and searching for something soft and mortal to sink their claws into.

He could hear them now, the crunch of boots on snow, the clanging of the Dragon's scales, so many measured chimes of the clock counting down. He could hear himself too, the blood in his ears, the pounding of his heart, the rush of water from the tank he'd spent so many sunless years in, and he was going to be sick.

I won't go back, he vowed, three-toed paw tinged blue from the cold. *I'll never go back.*

All around him, the hovel he'd holed up in seemed to shrink and cave in, as if some great black fist were slowly crushing it. There was no escaping now, no more running. Even if he fled, they would pursue him to the ends of the earth. He understood that now.

Dragons are predators, and I...

He did not know what he was, but he knew what he was not.

Mewtwo opened his mismatched eyes, one bloodshot and swollen from the disease's debilitation, the other glassy yellow. When he rose, the hovel rose with him. Pale blue light lifted them both into the air on a whim, and the hovel expanded to bursting. The tree sheltering it split and splintered, roots were ripped open like swollen black veins spilling their sap. The creatures of the forest---Spearow and Raticate, Poliwhirl and Noctowl---took to sky and stream and sand to flee from the dead lights surrounding him.

Mewtwo landed over the permafrost ground, but his toes never touched the earth. With a flick of his muscular tail, the thick trees

blocking his path groaned and splintered and parted for him like so many leal subjects falling to their knees, beseeching.

He set off, step by silent step, the hunted in search of his hunters.

The woods had grown claustrophobic in their dark monotony. Lily was sure she would never find her way out of these woods. Or perhaps they had no end, and the world she'd stepped into was and always had been this. They were alive, these woods, teeming with eyes she could not see, though she was sure they could see her. Something was lurking within, everywhere at once, inescapable. And it was closing in.

If Lance shared her mounting trepidation, he did a good job of hiding it. His Pokemon, however, were not shy about showing their unease. Kommo-o's musical steps were heavy, his eyes alert, his teeth bared for the hidden figures he spotted in the shadows, only to melt back into the void, never there at all. The two Dragonair were eerily quiet, their usual humming silenced as they slithered in between the trees. The pines were dusted with a thin layer of ice, and when Ampharos's light shined on them, it was as though they grinned at the passersby, a thousand needled teeth bared in wolfish delight.

Those same trees grew all around them, towering to impossible heights and bent under their own weight. Lily stared up at them, dreading whatever hallucination she might be suffering. Her arm throbbed. She feared infection. How much blood had she lost?

Somewhere beside her, Pikachu screeched as the trees reached down to touch her, and Lily had a sudden thought: could Pikachu see them, too? Her body moved faster than her thoughts, and she fell back as Pikachu leaped up and exploded with sizzling light. Lance shouted something that was drowned out in the flood of shadows and splinters and electricity, and Lily landed hard on her back and cried out in pain.

A crackling bolt of crimson Dragon Pulse forked and sliced a falling pine like a butcher's knife through sausage. The two halves crashed to the ground on either side of Lily and sent a hail of icy needles and splinters flying. Lily's Dragonair coiled about her, still glowing red with the aftermath of his attack.

All around, the forest had come to life and turned against Lance and her. He had Charizard out spewing fire, and Kommo-o whirled and twirled with all the grace of a prima ballerina Karate Chopping enemy rocks, trunks, and earth. A wave of water erupted from a thin river and crashed into Charizard, drying up the bed and knocking the orange pseudo-Dragon to the ground with a roar.

Lily struggled to her feet and nearly got her head taken off by a flying chunk of boulder Kommo-o had sent flying. All around her, the forest uprooted itself and turned its wrath on Lance and her.

"Amphy!" she shouted desperately.

The Light Pokemon unleashed a bright Thunderbolt that cleaved stone and earth and water and gave Lance an opening to run to Charizard's side for safety. He was limping, and his pant leg glistened, wet with blood, though she did not know how or when he'd been injured.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, and she turned to see a gnarled mass of roots hurtling straight for her, shedding dirt and sap in their wake. Before she had a chance to properly fear for her life, a blur of yellow filled her sight and knocked the projectile out of the way. Lily ducked on instinct, barely spared the impact, but she was scrambling after it seconds later.

"ChuChu!" she screamed.

Pikachu lay unmoving on the ground, bleeding from a gash on her back and twitching. She was filthy, covered in dirt and tangled up in the mass of spindly roots. Tears filled Lily's eyes as she bent over the small rodent and shielded her with her body.

"Show yourself!" Lance bellowed. "Mewtwo! You coward!"

"Mewtwo," Lily said, looking around and wiping her dirty tears. *This is him? All this power...*

Baleful blue light filtered through the broken forest, creeping like foggy worms wriggling through the cracks. Lily followed it to its source, and she came face to face with the creature she'd risked her life and more to find. Mewtwo wore the light like a cloak, and it moved with the consistency of water free from gravity, an extension of him. He stared back at Lily, and she could not move.

Daughter of Dragons, came a voice in her head that was both hers and not hers, both heard and felt, not really a voice at all. *I warned you.*

Lily was so frightened she could hardly form a coherent thought. His face was hideously disfigured on one side, scarred and weeping where his disease had eaten away at him. He was missing his arm, nothing but a soft grey stump, and he was emaciated and gaunt. But his lucid eye was full of contempt, and something else that made her want to close her eyes and pray this was all a bad dream.

"Mewtwo," Lance said, the awe evident in his voice. "So it's all true."

Mewtwo's eyes swiveled in their wide sockets, like some water-born reptile, to see Lance, but he said nothing further. All he did was raise his remaining three-toed paw, and the forest rose with him.

He's using the whole forest as a weapon! Lily thought frantically. *How do we fight a forest?!*

She was forced to move, scooping Pikachu up in her good arm and shouting for Ampharos and Dragonair. Dragonair smacked a naked tree trunk out of its collision path with Lily with a well-timed Dragon

Tail attack, and Lily skidded and tripped trying to get out of the way of a cluster of boulders. Madness, everywhere she turned. There was no choice but to fight back.

"Amphy! Tiny! Aim for the trees!" she commanded.

Thunder and lightning, red and yellow and a flurry of punches met the possessed forest as her Pokemon worked together to neutralize anything Mewtwo could animate and turn against them. Charizard, his scales black with Mega Evolution, took to the skies and rained blue flames down on the forest, incinerating trees and rocks and even the founts of water Mewtwo called up from rivers and streams.

Mewtwo was forced to Teleport in spurts as Kommo-o and the pink Dragonair turned their sights on him and began launching Clanging Scales and Dragon Rages at him directly. Lance was with them, staying low to avoid the flying debris, and urged them on.

"Lance!" Lily shouted. "What're you doing?!"

She feared for his safety approaching Mewtwo directly and tried to catch up to him.

"Mewtwo," Lance called to the furious Psychic. "I'm not here to stop you or cage you. I can help you!"

What? Lily was still running as she tried to make sense of his words.

Mewtwo was also watching Lance carefully.

"I understand," Lance shouted to be heard over the cacophony of the forest. "Humans are your enemy as much as they are mine!"

Lily could hardly believe what she was hearing.

"Join me," Lance entreated Mewtwo as Kommo-o smashed through another boulder that would have totaled Lance. "Together, we can return this world to its true masters."

A heartbeat, two, and then Mewtwo was suddenly directly in front of Lance. Kommo-o and the pink Dragonair rushed to help him, but they were too slow, and Mewtwo's flowing blue light shackled Lance. He touched a stubby finger to Lance's forehead, and as soon as it had begun, it was over. Lance was violently blasted back, and it was all Kommo-o could do to leap after him and Tackle him mid-flight. The Scaly Pokemon took the brunt of the fall for Lance, and together they rolled through a half-drained stream and landed in a mess of broken pines and smashed rocks.

"Lance!" Lily screamed.

Slaver, came Mewtwo's disembodied voice somewhere on the edges of her consciousness again. *You're the same as my Creator. I shall bestow upon you the only fate worthy of those who would style themselves "master."*

But just as Mewtwo raised his hand again and the air around him rippled with the beginnings of a powerful Psychic attack, Mega

Charizard dropped in from the sky and engulfed Mewtwo and the surrounding forest in a sea of blue fire. Lily was blown back from the force of the heat and Mega Charizard's rancor. Ampharos spooked, and Dragonair generated a Protect shield that just barely staved off the flames.

Lance managed to get himself up, though Kommo-o was having considerably more trouble of it. He'd lost some of his plated scales, and he was bleeding from a hidden wound in his side. Lance recalled him, and the pink Dragonair slithered to his side protectively as they looked on at the roiling blue flames eating away at the very earth beneath their feet.

All of a sudden, the flames whorled and formed a tall column. Mega Charizard roared and snapped as he circled them. Tendrils of blue Psychic energy crept up the tornado and pulled it apart, like fingers peeling back flesh from an open sore. From within, Mewtwo emerged, floating and bleeding from a burn in his leg. But if he was in pain, he did not show it. Lily gasped at the sight of him, at the feeling of black dread emanating from him like the heat from Mega Charizard's flames. In a matter of seconds, Mewtwo's Psychic energy had completely consumed Mega Charizard's fires.

"Monster," Lance spat. "There's no reasoning with him." He turned and caught Lily's gaze. "You must see that he has to be stopped!"

"What? No, Lance! You can't!"

"Perhaps he deserved your pity when he was a prisoner, but these are not the actions of a prisoner. Mewtwo must die."

Mewtwo descended, but he watched Mega Charizard's silhouette in the dark sky as if to take aim.

Lily was nearly at Lance's side. "No, this isn't the way. Mewtwo's not a monster, he's a victim! If you try to attack him, I'll stop you, I swear I will." There were tears in her eyes as she reached for Dragonair and Ampharos.

He looked at her funny. There was pity there, and disappointment, and a little sadness. "No, you won't," he said. "It's time for your final lesson."

Something in his pose, the look in his eyes, the way he looked down on her sent screaming alarm bells off in her head. Suddenly, she was knee-deep in blood and seawater back on Shamouti Island, a mythical power beyond reason hanging in the balance, and she was the only thing standing in Lance's way. Her throat clenched, and she tasted bile and salt on her tongue. She couldn't breath, and if she tried she knew she would inhale only cold seawater.

"Amphy! Use Thu---!"

"Stop," he interrupted.

Lily stopped, suddenly and completely. Her voice abandoned her

and her feet refused to move. Her whole body grew rigid, petrified to the spot as pine needles and earth and debris continued to fly around her, buoyed by Mewtwo's raw power. Lance stood opposite her, his hand outstretched to exert his control, but it was not her Dragons he had targeted this time.

"W-What," Lily gasped, finding it difficult to speak. "I ca...I can't..."

"The blood of Dragons flows in our veins, after all," Lance said tonelessly.

His voice pulled her in, magnetic, and she hung on every word.

I know this feeling, she realized. *Shamouti, and with the Hariyama. Lance's pull...*

His control was at once smothering and uplifting. She felt as though she could take to the skies and fly if only he gave the command.

You, came Mewtwo's distant thought voice that wasn't a voice at all. *Dragon-slaver, your time is come.*

Lily's eyes filled with tears, but her throat was tight and kept her silence. Around her, Ampharos and Dragonair abandoned her to join Lance, drawn into his orbit just as she had been, and when Mega Charizard descended, they joined him in the strike against Mewtwo. All Lily could do was look on, helpless to stop them as they spat fire, threw lightning, and bathed the battlefield in bloody draconian energy to bring Mewtwo to his knees. She could hardly keep track of it all as she fell to her knees and sank into the half-frozen earth, unable to move.

I'm so pathetic, she thought, shaking with rage and fear and self-loathing as her Pokemon fought for their lives against their will. *Lance was right, I could never really stop him.*

How could she have ever thought she could stand up to the strongest Titan in the world? He was a Dragonmaster, blessed with all the powers of persuasion and control only the very best of them could master. He had summoned Lugia, the mythical king of the nine oceans, to do his bidding. He'd held the world hostage for his misguided, selfish ideals. And she had failed to kill him in the end.

Everything she was, everything she had achieved, it was all built on lies and luck. She was no hero, no gifted Titan. She was just a naive woman in over her head and brought to her knees.

Beyond, the battle raged as Lance and all their Pokemon combined their power to kill Mewtwo. Mega Charizard led the assault, and somehow Lance was holding his own against this powerful Psychic that had decimated all of Cinnabar Island and taken countless lives in his vengeful anguish. Lily watched as Lance split up his Pokemon to attack in waves, each moving independently of the rest and forcing Mewtwo to split his concentration to protect his blind spots.

It was incredible, what Lance could do. This was the product of all his years of training, of all his genius, of the cruelty he'd endured all for the sake of power, for this culminating moment when he stood on equal footing with a creature literally created to be a force of nature. Lance was so far ahead of her, a true Champion, the best there ever was.

Next to him, she was nobody.

Pikachu regained consciousness in her arms, battered and bruised and hardly able to move much. Wet dark eyes blinked up at Lily, and she choked on a sob.

"ChuChu," she whispered. *I'm so sorry.*

Pikachu wrinkled her nose and struggled to stand up. She rolled of out Lily's arms and trembled, squeaking as the pain became too unbearable to handle. Lily wanted to hold her close and keep her safe, but she couldn't even do that much.

"Don't," Lily managed as Pikachu tried to get up.

But Pikachu stubbornly pressed on, her ears twitching at the sounds of battle not far away. She saw Ampharos and Dragonair in the mix, and Lily wondered what she thought of that. On shaky legs, Pikachu bravely stood and began to spark. There was some fight left in her yet.

A terrible cry of pain reached Lily from the battlefield, followed by Lance's voice.

"No!" he shouted with such emotion that Lily felt physically ill.

The pink Dragonair took a hit from Mewtwo's Psychic, and she writhed on the ground as the telekinetic energy ate through her flesh. Her own gleaming magenta scales dug in and tore her apart inch by inch. She soon fell still, and Lance rushed to her side, the battle momentarily forgotten.

Despite her situation, Lily could feel Lance's pain as clearly as if it were her own. It was her own, or there was no discerning where his ended and hers began. The pink Dragonair, whom she'd affectionately nicknamed Shiny, had been on the verge of death when Lily saved her after the battle on Shamouti Island. After Lance had plunged to the depths of the ocean with Lugia, lost to all but her.

"What you are is something to revere, not to shame. Anyone who makes you feel the lesser for it is not worthy of you."

Lily shook, and Pikachu waddled forward, sparking and ready to help the pink Dragonair, whom she'd grown to love as much as Lily had. Lily gritted her teeth, teeth too long and too sharp to be entirely human.

"Even if you despise me, I cannot abide you despising yourself."

Lily got to one knee and clenched her teeth so hard she was sure they might shatter.

"You're no mere fortynblod. You're a Titan for true. Just like me."

Something did shatter then, but it wasn't her teeth. Suddenly, Lily could move. She could breath. And she ran.

Pikachu sprinted after her, oblivious to the pain and the struggle and her own limitations, and Lily ripped off the strip of Lance's cloak bandaging her burned hand. She reached Ampharos, who flailed wildly at her approach, driven to bloodlust under Lance's control and blind with violence. Lily threw her arms around Ampharos and pressed her burned and bloody palm to his neck as he began to spark. Electricity needled under her skin, thin razors worming their way inside, and she closed her eyes.

"Amphy!" she screamed, holding on for dear life.

Just when Lily thought Ampharos would electrocute her for real, the burning pain faded and her skin tingled, pleasantly warm. Her arms fell away, unable to hold on as Ampharos grew beneath her, and when she opened her eyes again, Mega Ampharos towered over her protectively. His scaly skin and magnificent woolen mane brimmed with red static, and he recognized her. There was no trace of Lance's control left in either of them.

I will show you the true meaning of control, Mewtwo bellowed from above and below and within. He extended a hand to Lance and the pink Dragonair, and when Mega Charizard descended with a wicked Fire Blast, the flames rolled off Mewtwo like water off a Ducklett's back. His forcefield was impervious, growing, and with the wave of his stubby paw, it exploded with a wave of Psychic energy.

Lily reached for Mewtwo on instinct. "Dragon Pulse!"

Mega Ampharos roared and unleashed a mighty scarlet thunderbolt. It zigzagged over the earth as if it rose from below, and when it cleaved Mewtwo's Psychic, the energy popped and burst in a scintillating explosion of color and sound and heat. Pikachu added the last of her thunder to the blast, and Mega Charizard above and Dragonair below let loose their own Dragon Pulses. Lily shielded her eyes and fell back, buffeted by the sonic wave of Psychic energy.

Smoke and static and dust roiled in a haze over the decimated stretch of forest Mewtwo had razed during their battle. Not far, Lily saw Lance and the pink Dragonair. Mega Charizard landed and eclipsed them both with his bat-like wings. To her horror, he was getting up and giving Mega Charizard a command.

"No!" Lily shouted at him, wheezing and coughing. "Lance, stop this! Please!"

He paused and looked at her, and she limped toward him, stumbling.

"Please," she entreated him. "Mewtwo's no more a monster than you are. *Please*."

You're wrong, said Mewtwo, suddenly inches away from her.

Lily opened her mouth to scream, but his telekinesis raised her up by the neck like a noose, and she dangled helplessly before him.

He's a man, Mewtwo's voice echoed in every cell of her body, inundating. *And all men are monsters.*

He touched a deformed finger to her forehead, as he'd done to Lance earlier, and suddenly Lily was no longer here, but in the past. She saw Lance standing across her on Shamouti Island, his hand outstretched in command, and Ash's enslaved Charizard roared and charged her with fire and fury. She saw mighty Dragonite rising high and raining meteors upon the earth in his wrath. She saw Lugia, driven mad under Lance's terrible control, and she screamed.

You humans are the most monstrous beings of all, Mewtwo taunted. *There is no creature half so despicable as the one who enslaves others. You, Daughter of Dragons, are no different.*

Lily could feel herself jerked about from vision to vision as if she stood on the deck of some precarious seafaring vessel in the midst of a storm. Her mind spun and her stomach lurched, tempestuous and tumbling, and she revisited dark and lonely memories of drowning, nightmares of Dragons with teeth as long as swords hunting her, bitter conversations in darkness.

"He's gone," Ash promised her. *"He got what he deserved."*

No, Mewtwo whispered. *But he will.*

Lily whirled, but Mewtwo was not there. There was nothing there, only the falling and the darkness and the cold sea pressing in on all sides.

"No," she said as her mouth and lungs filled with water. "No, *you're* wrong!"

I have seen the past. Your lies and his cannot change it, Mewtwo said.

The scene changed to a dark, damp place hidden away from sunlight and starlight alike. Lily remembered this place, Mewtwo's dark prison tank in Mt. Cinnabar before he'd escaped. She saw Blaine and Marla and herself, all gathered and discussing Mewtwo's existence as if he were nothing but an idea to be picked apart, rather than a creature of flesh and blood and feeling, listening to their every word.

Lily watched, deeply saddened by her part in all this, in all that had happened to Mewtwo and all the destruction he'd caused.

All you know, all you humans have ever known, is how to enslave and manipulate and control, came Mewtwo's accusatory whisper.

Lily tried to block out his voice, but he was everywhere, under her skin and crawling in her ears and flooding her lungs. If this was a dream, a vision, it was so vivid and real that she had no doubt he could kill her in it, perhaps even damn her to live in it forever. She closed her eyes and tried to focus, to think of something, anything,

that might pull her out of this.

"You could stay..."

Lily gagged on seawater, and when she opened her eyes, she saw Lance as he had been that grey day so long ago, his hand outstretched in offering.

"Stay," he pleaded, *"and you'll understand a little of what I mean."*

The scene changed in a torrent of color and light, and she was flying over the ocean, to the mountains to the north, to uncharted lands beyond the reach of human civilization and memory. And Lance was there, too, his head bowed in shadows, thanking her for looking after Dragonair.

Your lies prove nothing, Mewtwo said.

"They're not lies," Lily said, as the scene changed again to nights spent around campfires, days and days of hiking north, a steaming hot spring.

"I could teach you," Lance offered in the dream.

Sunlight turned to mist as the bones of that ancient elephant graveyard rose from below, and Lily found him walking alone, staring at those petrified bones with a lost look, melancholy for all that had been forgotten, all that would never be again.

"Even if you despise me, I cannot abide you despising yourself."

She saw Larvitar crying for his parents, the rampaging Tyranitar, and Lance standing before them ready to be trampled to spur her into action and finally accept the truth. She saw Ampharos Mega Evolving for the first time, Lance and Mega Charizard fighting the Hariyama.

"I'm sorry, Mewtwo," she said. "But you're wrong."

"It's not about control." Lance held her burned hand close to his face as he woke from a nightmare and recognized her. *"It's a connection."*

Lily felt solid ground underfoot, and her knees gave out. With a cry, she landed in a dirty heap on the ground as Mewtwo stood over her. All around, nothing had changed. No one had moved, as if all that time, all those moments relived had passed in the blink of an eye.

Mewtwo was so close, glowing as his energy rippled off him in beautiful blue pennons, twisting and twining. A mere thought and he could eviscerate her, and she would never even see it coming. And yet, he merely looked down on her, those mismatched eyes half-lidded and unblinking, lifelessly glassy.

A connection, he said. *You believe semantics can exonerate him of his crimes? Of yours?*

"No," Lily said, trembling. "And it doesn't change what happened. There's darkness in the world, and we're all capable of evil. What Blaine did to you was unforgivable. What Lance did was horrifying. And what I did, just standing by while you suffered... It was weak, and cruel.

"But there's also good in the world, in humans," she entreated him. "I've seen it in Lance. And I know you can see it in me. Otherwise, you would have already killed us both."

I can still kill you, Mewtwo threatened. *Both of you. I could kill your Pokemon, or set them free. The Creator made me a monster, and as you say, we are all capable of evil.*

"You're also capable of choice," Lily countered. "I chose to come out here because I wanted to fix my mistakes. Lance helped me because I believe a part of him wanted to atone for his. So now it's your turn, Mewtwo. Make your choice."

Lance said nothing as he looked on, his expression unreadable. Mega Ampharos snarled, wary of Mewtwo, and Pikachu could barely stay on her feet. Mewtwo raised his hand, and Lily's heart leaped into her throat.

But death never came. Mewtwo turned away from her and from Lance and closed his eyes. He hovered there, suspended on the edge of something, and finally he cast one last cold glance back at Lily.

A life for a life, Mewtwo said.

His body flickered like static, and suddenly he was gone.

Lily sat back and shivered. The sun would be up soon, the first of its fires already hinting at the eastern horizon, and she looked forward to what little warmth it would bring. Mega Ampharos lowered his head and nudged her. His wool was impossibly soft, and she wished she could fall asleep right there and rest for a year.

The flash of light from the pink Dragonair being recalled to her Pokeball drew Lily's attention, and she saw Lance approach her slowly. He limped, and one of his eyes was badly bloodshot and cut around the edges, purpling like a Zigzagoon's. But when Mega Ampharos bared his teeth and began to spark, Lance stopped.

They looked at each other, neither speaking for the longest time. Until finally, unexpectedly, he broke their silence first.

"This is where I leave you," he said softly and without intonation, as if it were merely a passing observation.

"Yeah," Lily said, her voice raw and hoarse.

He watched her, and she watched him. His eyes moved over her, as if charting every inch, every color he hadn't noticed before, or perhaps he did not want to forget. But no matter how hard Lily tried, she would never divine what he was truly thinking. So she let him have his last moment, unbroken. Neither said a word about the battle, about Mewtwo, about the choices they had made, in this life and the life that came before. And the longer they stayed that way, the less Lily cared to ask. This moment was hers as much as it was his.

"You could stay," he said, soft as a dream.

Lily opened her mouth to respond, but all she managed was a

strangled knot in her throat. Was he real? Or was she still reeling in Mewtwo's fever visions? Was any of it real?

"There's so much more you can learn."

There was promise in those words as much as pleading, and she believed him. She believed every word, and she could see it, the life they might lead together in this wild and beautiful world that was theirs. A life she had never known until him, a life she had never wanted until him. She wanted it, in spite of everything, she wanted it in her bones, in her heart, in her blood that was his, too.

He graced her with a slight smirk, at once dashing and deadly and sad. "Stay, and you'll understand everything."

How strange, this place worlds away from all that either of them had ever known. He was born here, this second half-life she had given him. And she had been born here, too, finally cognizant of who she truly was and who she could become. His old life was over, his Dragons dead, and like those ancient elephants in their misty graveyard, he would be forgotten.

But not by Lily. She would never forget him. And neither, she believed, would he ever forget her. This connection, it was older than Time, more vast than Space, and nothing would ever, ever defeat it.

"I wish I could stay," she said, meaning every word. Hot tears fell down her cheeks, though she could not remember when they had begun.

"Wishes are for dreamers and fools."

It pained her to smile, remembering the last time he had spoken like this to her. "Then I guess I'm a dreamer."

"And I the fool."

Lily let his words sink in, and they were her undoing. Shaking, she buried her face in her hands and let go. She couldn't say how long she sat there, small and trembling and surrounded by her Pokemon, but a gust of wind made her look up in time to see Lance on Mega Charizard's back flying off. And this time, she knew, he would not return.

As Mewtwo before him, Lance the Dragonmaster disappeared, and in his wake came the dawn, warm and bright.

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter will be an epilogue to wrap up some loose ends. It's hard to believe this fic is coming to a close! Thanks so much to everyone who's been sticking with it. I promise the wait is nearly over.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lily spent weeks in a hospital in Blackthorn City receiving treatment for her grievous wounds. The burns Mega Charizard's fire had inflicted on her had required extensive reconstructive surgery. Her recovery was painful and slow, and the scars of her battle with Mewtwo would remain with her forever. Lying in her hospital bed alone one night, she mused that when she saw Ash next, they would match. The thought was not as funny later when she was no longer doped up on pain killers.

She had few visitors, and something told her Clair had everything to do with that. The Blackthorn Gym Leader had overseen every aspect of her recovery, from keeping Lily's presence in Blackthorn a closely-guarded secret from the media to ensuring the best possible care money could buy, courtesy of the Dragon clan's own coffers. Clair spent hours by her bedside while Lily was passed out recovering, silently waiting. She oversaw the care of Lily's Pokemon and gave them free rein of the Gym grounds and the Ice Path to keep them healthy and hale once they were well enough. Pikachu, however, mostly chose to remain by Lily's side instead of joining the others outside. There was no getting the little Electric rodent out of that room without suffering a bad Thundershock in the process. She and Clair became the oddest of bedside mates, quietly tolerant of each other but ever wary.

It was Clair who explained all this to her when Lily was finally recovered enough to be conscious for more than ten minutes at a time. Blackthorn had received word of the tragedy that befell Cinnabar Island in the wake of Mt. Cinnabar's eruption, and it was not long after that Clair found out about Lily's escapades into the wilds of the Kyukai Valley. She had flown north on her Dragonite, alongside some of her Gym Trainers and General---now Gym Leader---Marla's Charizard Assault Team riders. Together, the search party scoured the Kyukai Valley for signs of Lily, until they finally came across her wandering in the middle of a decimated forest that looked as though a hurricane had ravaged it. The rest was simply a matter of time and healing.

"You're lucky to be alive," Clair admonished her when she came to. "Not even I would be so brazen as to venture into the Kyukai Valley alone."

"I wasn't alone," Lily defended.

When Clair looked at her pointedly, Lily regretted her words. She

had decided never to breathe a word about Lance. Lily was pretty sure he wouldn't be eager to commit any crimes soon and announce to the world that he had survived, especially with Mewtwo no longer in the picture. It would have been a sort of betrayal of their time spent together, of the man she'd grown to know and even understand a little away from the eyes of the world. More than anything, though, she would not give the people who had a heavy hand in raising him to be the criminal he turned out to be an easy scapegoat for their own sins. It didn't seem right, and despite Lance's sins, they were his to bear and no one else's to hide behind. If nothing else, for all that he had given her, she believed she owed him that much.

"I mean, I had ChuChu and the others," Lily said hastily.

Clair looked at her impassively, and Lily wondered if she believed her. She was quite certain she'd never seen Clair emote much beyond boredom or annoyance.

"Of course," Clair said. "Anyway, I've taken care of all your medical needs. I've also arranged for lodgings here in Blackthorn, so you can stay and recover for as long as you need. I doubt you want to be confined to a hospital bed and grey cafeteria food for much longer."

"Oh, um, thanks. I mean, no offense, but I kinda didn't expect that from you. It's nice," she added quickly. "Thanks."

"One thank you is enough," Clair said flatly. "And no thanks are necessary. Titans look after our own."

Lily thought of Lance and the secret she carried. "Yeah, we do."

Clair got up from the nondescript brown chair in the corner of the bland hospital room and smoothed her black pencil skirt. She was made up and smartly dressed, as if she were going to a lunch meeting to discuss the municipal tax code. "I'll let you rest. If you need anything, press that button. There's a nurse on call for your exclusive use."

She gathered her bag and made to leave, but she paused in the doorway and looked back. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?" Lily asked.

"For before, on Cinnabar, when we met." Clair's eyes were the color of the sea at night, stormy and turbulent, like she was never settled and holding onto something she could not afford to lose. "I doubted your ability, and I pitied your naivete." She took a deep breath through her nose and picked invisible lint from the sleeve of her blazer. "I was wrong."

"Clair," Lily said, unsure.

"You stood up to Lance. You did what I couldn't... What I was never brave enough to do. That's why I advocated for you to take his place in the Elite Four. I just... I thought you deserved to know that. It wasn't politics for me personally."

Lily worried her lip. Her paper hospital gown was scratchy on her skin, and it offered little warmth to combat her gooseflesh. "Thank you, Clair. I... That really means a lot coming from you."

Clair nodded, looking anywhere but at Lily. "Good. Well. That's that. I'll leave you to it."

She turned to excuse herself.

"Wait," Lily called to her. "I'm sorry, too. Your childhood, the clan, the control and stripping away emotions and all that..."

Clair looked like the floor had given way beneath her. "How did you...?"

"Lance," Lily said quickly. "I mean, he told me a little about it, when we fought, um, back then, you know..." It was half a truth, half a lie, and Clair seemed so taken aback that she didn't question it. "He told me about how the clan taught control without emotion. I, um... I can't imagine what it was like for you, but I know it wasn't easy. I knew nothing about it, and I had no right... I'm sorry. I was wrong and presumptuous to preach to you the way I did."

Clair looked at her like she was really taking a moment to see her for the first time, weighing her worth. "You were right, you know."

"About what?"

"You said you'd show me a sight I'd never seen before." Clair smiled, but it wasn't a happy one. She was young, a woman in her prime and the leader of a prestigious Dragon clan or as good as, with the Elder confined to a sick bed in the winter of his life. And yet, she looked older then, her smile tired and a little disappointed, but not at Lily. "You kept your promise."

Lily did not know what to say to that. She was sure she had never seen Clair so raw and vulnerable before. Clair had always been cut from marble, unapproachable and unflappable. It made her a strong leader in times of uncertainty and change, something Blackthorn sorely needed if the Titans were ever going to rise from the political and social morass that was the old way, the Elder's way, the lessons Lance had grown up with, and Clair, too. For the first time since Lily's eyes had been opened to her place in this ancient order, she could see a light at the end. There was hope for change, for the little boys and girls who might learn for themselves that it was not about control, it was a connection.

"I have a...friend," Clair said. "She's not really a friend. I haven't spoken to her in ages, it seems. Not since she left. Iris reminds me a little of you."

"Iris?"

Clair smiled to herself, but she was seeing something Lily could not as she lost herself in memories. "She's so determined, so sure that no matter what happens, she'll prevail. She believes." Clair looked up at

Lily. "She promised to show me me something I've never seen before, too. And I believed her, as I should've believed you."

Lily said nothing to that. There seemed to be nothing more to say, so she smiled and let Clair have her last word.

"Okay," Clair said, collecting herself. "Get some rest. Eat, sleep, whatever. I'll leave you be."

"Clair," Lily called one last time.

She paused, expectant.

"When I'm better, I'd like to talk to you about Blackthorn. The Titans, all that. I think... Well, I think as one of the Elite Four, I could do something to help when you officially take over as the leader of the Taki Dynasty."

Clair looked at her in quiet surprise. "I'd like that."

Lily smiled. "Then I look forward to working together."

Clair nodded, and she left, leaving Lily alone with the snoozing Pikachu in her lap. She lay back in her bed and closed her eyes, and as was her custom, she thought about Lance. What would he think about her proposal to Clair? About the changes coming to Blackthorn? Would he even care? She wished she could tell him, but she knew it was not to be. Wherever he was, he was not coming back.

Maybe that was really why she'd kept his secret. To the rest of the world, he was dead, even forgotten. But to her, he would live on as she remembered him, not as his reputation damned him. In a way, it was the kind of immortality he'd always romanticized when he spoke of the Old Blood, of their heritage. To be immortal was to be remembered, but to be remembered for who we are instead of for what we have done, that was rarer still. And perhaps, Lily thought sadly, that is all we can ever ask for, and all we really need.

The Indigo Keep was just as she'd left it, Lily mused happily when she returned after her stint in Blackthorn. Jonathan the Ranger was still running around like a headless Torchic managing the other Rangers and seeing to the Elites' needs and requests; Chuck was jovial and jolly and overjoyed that today was a new day and they were all back together again; Surge was outwardly sour and inwardly grateful to have her back as a voice of reason amidst the chaos that was life in Indigo Plateau as he saw it; and Ash was waiting with open arms.

"Lily!" he exclaimed as he picked her up and twirled her around like she weighed nothing at all. "I missed you like crazy!"

He kissed her hard, and she melted into him. She had forgotten how much she loved his touch, breathing the same air, feeling his warmth. The sight of him and his bright smile made her cry, and to her surprise, he cried with her as he held her.

"Fuck, I missed you," he said softly, kissing her neck, her cheek, her lips, her shoulder. "You have no idea."

Lily laughed through her tears. "I think I'm starting to."

"Well, this calls for a celebration!" Chuck announced to absolutely no one's surprise. "Jonathan! Where's the whiskey, anyway? We have a party to throw, har!"

Surge patted her shoulder and even managed half a grin for her. "Good to have you back, kid. Don't you ever pull some shit like that again, you got it?"

Lily looked abashed, but she smiled through her flush. "Not without you as my backup, Lieutenant."

Surge snorted, but he scooped up Pikachu and ruffled her static-laden fur. "My offer stands, 'bout havin' a practice with your Electric-types."

Lily beamed. "I'd love it! Just name the time and place."

"What? A private training session with Surge?" Ash said. "Count me in!"

"Ash, it's not private if you're there," Lily teased.

Gengar and Mismagius emerged from Ash's shoulders, and Gengar grinned salaciously and stuck out his rotted black tongue at Surge.

"Butt out, you damned hooligan," Surge bit out.

Lily laughed. "Gengar, I missed you, too."

Gengar clutched his belly and cackled. The sound echoed ominously throughout the hall, and the tapestries embroidered with the seals of the great cities of Kanto and Johto fluttered nervously.

The reunion was sweet, and Lily had not realized how much she'd missed them all. Violet was due in the next morning, and she could not wait to see the Syreni woman. Ivy and Gary had planned a trip up now that Ash and Lily were both back, and Lily had marked her calendar to count down the days. She had missed so much, lingered in the hearts of so many people, and she could not quite believe it. She had left a whole world, a whole life behind when she set out to the Kyukai Valley in pursuit of Mewtwo. It had never felt so good to be home.

Later that night, after much drinking and merriment and much-missed bawdy banter courtesy of Chuck, Lily and Ash retired to their shared room and missed each other even more. It was a night of silken sheets and soft candlelight, of warm hands and tender kisses, smiles and whispered confessions. He kissed every inch of her, scars and all, and she held him until they fell asleep. They didn't talk about what they'd been through, what they'd seen in their time away, the questions left unanswered or the ones they had yet to ask. They simply spent that first night together cherishing what they had left behind, relishing what they had perhaps taken for granted before, and loving each other and the time they had together.

Lily woke in the wee hours of the early morning before the sun

came up, thirsty. She slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb the two Pikachu who slept curled up together at the foot of their canopy bed, and padded to the bathroom. She closed the door quietly behind her and turned on the light. Half asleep, she relieved herself, flushed, and went to the sink to wash her hands. When reached for the hand towel hanging next to the faucet, she gasped and nearly slipped on the tiled floor stumbling back. Where the wide bathroom mirror had been, a thick curtain had been affixed over it. Not just draped, but nailed into the stone wall.

"What the hell...?" Lily wondered aloud as she pushed back the thick layers of curtain to see the mirror. But to her complete bafflement, the mirror itself had been painted over with big oily brush strokes. There was no sliver left uncovered in the rippling black, no way to see her own reflection in the glass at all. For the life of her, she could not hazard a guess as to why. It was odd, not being able to see herself reflected back, but perhaps there was a good reason for it. Maybe the mirror needed repairs? But then, why would someone have painted over it? All she knew was that it was quite late, or quite early depending on one's perspective, and she needed more sleep.

After taking a satisfying drink of water, Lily quietly returned to the bedroom. However, something caught her eye in the corner of the room. Moonlight filtered through the window pane, offering scant enough light to see by, and she padded to the corner where the full-length mirror sat. It had been covered and turned around. She laid a hand on the thick curtain draped over the mirror and puzzled over it. Were all the mirrors in the Keep similarly covered? She tried to remember, but her memory was fuzzy. Although, now that she thought about it, she hadn't checked her reflection at all since coming back today.

It probably meant nothing. Maybe Ash had a perfectly reasonable explanation for turning the mirrors around. It had to be Ash, she reasoned. No one else came into their room except the cleaning staff, and Lily could not imagine why they might do something like this. Ash, though...

She went to the bed and stood over him. He was sleeping soundly in a soft cotton T-shirt, his hair a mess, his mouth open as he breathed heavily. As far as Lily knew, his Ghosts were dormant within him. He was dreaming, lost to reality and time, peaceful. All was well with his world. But she couldn't shake the chill she got just looking at him. She wondered what he was dreaming about in such a deep slumber. He was so still lying there, as if he might not wake up even if she shook him.

Lily got back into bed and settled in next to Ash and snuggled up against him. She always felt safe with him like this, though he didn't

stir at all. She tried to fall back asleep, but her gaze was continually drawn to the covered mirror in the corner that reflected nothing but darkness now. It was her last thought before she drifted off into a fitful sleep, and she dreamed of a forest come to life, of rivers of light crawling under her skin, and of Dragons.

Lily and Ash told each other a little of their journeys. He told her that he'd nearly lost his life and Blastoise's fighting an ornery Rhyperior, and Lily recounted her night spent fending off wild Staraptor with Ampharos's help. He told her about the safe house Agatha used, and she told him about the wild beauty of the Kyukai Valley with its many lakes and waterfalls, untouched by man. He mentioned Morty, how he'd found him and helped him and stayed with him. Lily didn't say a word about Lance.

"It sounds lonely," Ash said as they shared breakfast together. "You were going after Mewtwo with no one to help you? Why didn't you ask Gary or something? Or even some of the Rangers?"

Lily concentrated on cutting her waffles, curious at his choice of words. To anyone else, her exploits would seem dangerous, even reckless, but Ash had a unique perspective on just about everything. "It was my responsibility. My mess. After what happened to Blaine, I just... I thought I had to go alone."

Ash looked at her. "...Yeah, I think I get what you mean."

"You do?"

"Mm. Still, next time, we'll go together, okay? You 'n me're better together."

Lily smiled. "Yeah, I guess we are."

They ate their breakfast and talked animatedly of everything and nothing. It was so good to hear Ash's voice again, to talk about trivial things just to fill the silence and for the sake of smiling. He always made her laugh, made her enjoy life like no one else could. With him, it was easy to be happy.

They were sipping coffee together and walking through the halls of the Indigo Keep when they passed by a mirror. This one was small, part of an art display, barely the size of Lily's hand. Even so, when they passed it, Ash casually slipped his arm around her shoulders and switched their positions so that she walked between him and the mirror. It was an innocent action, nothing at all to raise suspicion, but after what she'd seen last night, Lily couldn't help but notice it.

"Hey, Ash," she said. "I wanted to ask you about the mirrors."

"Hm? What mirrors?"

"The ones you defaced up in our room," she said.

His red eyes were wide and innocent, but he hesitated. It was strange. Normally, she would never have questioned him, but her time with Lance had forced her to consider everything he had said, how he

said it, how he looked when he said it, to discern the lie. She found herself employing the same tactics with Ash now, and she found him wanting. He was hiding something, and she could not begin to imagine what it could be.

"Oh, those," he said, laughing a little to brush her off. "It's nothing."

"You're lying," she said, stopping. "Why are you lying?"

He stopped and faced her. "Hey, whoa, I'm not lying. And since when're you so suspicious, anyway?"

"You're hiding something. I can see it." More gently she added, "Look, Ash, whatever it is, you can tell me, you know? I'm on your side, always. I want to help you."

When he didn't say anything, she stepped closer.

"Before you left, you were really...serious. You were so determined to go off on your own. Now, you're back and it's like you don't have any worries at all."

"So?"

"So, do you want to talk about it? I can see something's wrong, something you don't want to talk about, but maybe you should. Maybe... Maybe I can help?"

He looked at her for a long time, debating his words. "You're different," he said at length.

"I am?"

"Yeah. More, I dunno, older somehow. Sure of yourself. Wanna tell me more about what you went through?"

Ash would never know it, but in that moment, Lily had been so close to spilling everything about Lance, about their adventures together, what he had taught her about herself, about Titans and their shared heritage, everything. She was nearly overcome with the urge to confide in someone she trusted, a kindred spirit who might understand.

But as much as she loved Ash, as well as he meant, she knew he would never understand. He had never understood, not since Charizard met his end at Lance's hand. All Ash knew of Titans, for better or for worse, was the pain they had caused him. She couldn't blame him for that, not really. Not until he was ready to take a long hard look at himself and his perceptions of those around him. Of her. So she held her tongue, and she hoped that one day, someday, perhaps he would be ready to listen to what she had to say. But today was not that day.

"I told you about Mewtwo already," she said. "But...Ash, I'm worried about you."

He averted his gaze. She recognized that look, that stubborn annoyance, with her and with himself. She was reminded again of the boy he still was, of how far he had yet to go. But those with the

longest roads to travel had the most to gain along the way. He was still wandering, just as she had been.

I still am.

He opened his mouth to respond, then thought better of it. Frowning, he scratched the back of his neck. "You know, I don't think you'd believe me even I told you."

I don't think you'd believe me, either.

Lily closed the distance between them and kissed him on the cheek. "It doesn't matter what I believe. If you believe, then that's what's real."

He held her gaze, and she shivered. The red of his eyes had always been intense. Often laughing and bright, but sometimes subdued, lurid, even cursed. He was haunted by Ghosts, and no matter how gregarious Gengar could be, he was still an undead spirit lusting after the living.

"What if I don't know what's real?" Ash said. "What if it's all a dream?"

Lily was reminded of something then, something she hadn't thought of in a long time. She had not seen Ash in so long, but being around him stirred memories she had left buried.

"How does the haunted one sleep when waking is a dream, and the dream is not his?" she said.

Ash looked at her with an unreadable expression. "What did you say?"

She shook her head. "It's... I guess it was a prophecy, or a fortune. The Pyromancer on Cinnabar Island before..." She licked her lips. "Or, Mewtwo, really. He said that to me, through her. I didn't really get it."

Ash said nothing, and Lily shifted her weight, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Sorry, I don't know why I just thought of that," she said.

"No, it's fine," he said, not quite fine at all. "Honestly, Lily... There's a lot I'm not telling you. I'm just not really sure how, or even if I really should, you know..."

She couldn't help but feel a little hurt by his words, but immediately felt like a hypocrite for thinking so. There was so much she couldn't tell him, so much she kept from him.

"That's okay," she said, meaning it. "You know, I think there are some things that happen to us, and other people can't really understand them. It's not because they don't love us enough, or they're stupid, or anything like that. I think it's just... It's personal, I guess. It's something we have to sort through on our own. And maybe one day, when we're ready, we can share it. But until then, I think it's okay to hold onto it. It's not a lie, it's just not meant for anybody else. Not yet, at least."

He looked at her like he might split in two. He took her face in his hands and pulled her close, and she buried her nose in his neck.

"Thanks, Lily," he said hoarsely. "That means a lot."

When a wayward Swoobat arrived later that week with a letter addressed to Ash, Lily was surprised at how unsurprising its request was.

"It's from Rosa," Ash told her. "She's asking us to help her in the fight against Neo Team Plasma and a buncha other guys causing shit in Unova. It sounds pretty bad."

"Team Plasma? Weren't those the guys who sold all the Chimera tech to Team Rocket before?" Lily asked.

"Well, this is *Neo* Team Plasma. Maybe there's a difference? I dunno, I think they're related."

"Chimera." Lily shivered. "It's been so quiet here after Team Rocket, I almost forgot it was still out there."

Ash approached her. She sat at her desk in the on-site office she kept, reading an article in a scientific journal about advancements in Pokemon gene therapy pioneered by a rising star in Sinnoh's Galactic Enterprises---a man called Cyrus.

"I'm gonna go," Ash said.

Lily set down the magazine and gave him her full attention. "You're going to Unova?"

"Yeah."

"You know Rosa wants you to fight, right? It's a war zone over there. The news reports I've been seeing talk about entire cities being invaded, Gym Leaders dying or disappearing left and right, even rumors about a civil war... It's a real mess over there."

"Yeah, I know," Ash said. "I wanna help."

Lily stood up and draped her arms around his neck. "You always wanna help."

He laughed. "Fair. But this time it's Rosa asking. And she really helped us out back on Cinnabar."

Lily nodded. "She did save my life."

"Well, there you go. This is the perfect opportunity to pay her back."

He was hesitating again, a little too eager, and Lily suspected he was hiding something again.

"Ash," she said gently, "is there maybe another reason you wanna go?"

"Huh?"

"It's okay if there is. You don't need anybody's permission. I just... I'm concerned about you. Is that okay?"

He smoothed her long hair with his hands and touched their foreheads together. "Of course it's okay. I love you, remember?"

"I love you, too."

He took a deep breath, collected his thoughts. "I wanna help Rosa, for sure. But...the truth is, there's another reason to go. There's a Medium who lives in Unova. Shauntal. She's, uh... Morty sorta suggested she could help me."

"Help you with what?"

Ash shrugged. "I don't really know, to be honest. But I know I need help, and... I don't really know who else to turn to."

Lily stood on her tip toes and kissed him softly on the lips. "Then you should go."

"Really?" he said. "You're sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"No, just the last time I left, you were pretty upset. I mean, understandably... And I really missed you while I was gone. If you want me to stay..."

Lily tightened her grip on his shirt and searched his eyes. "Go," she said. "Don't worry about me. You need this, I can tell. So you should follow it until you find what you're looking for, no matter how long it takes."

Ash looked at her like he didn't understand the language she was speaking. "Lily..."

"Listen to me, Ash. I don't know what happened to you, and I'm not asking you to tell me everything. But I do know that sometimes, we can only find answers from people like us, who know what it's like. Maybe I can't help you with what you're going through, and that's okay. I can accept that. But I'd never keep you from seeking out someone who can. That connection..." She smiled sadly. "It's everything. I want that for you, Ash. I want you to find the answers you've been searching for. If that means going to Unova, then you have to go."

Ash had no words for her. She weaved her fingers through his dark hair and pulled him close.

"I'll be here when you get back," she promised. "We all will. This life, this world... It'll all be here for you when you're ready to come back to it. Just promise you'll come back one day."

"I promise," he said readily. "I'll come back to you. I swear I will."

She laughed. "Good."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him close.

"You *are* different," he whispered against the shell of her ear. "I like it."

"Me too."

"What you are is something to revere, not to shame. Anyone who makes you feel the lesser for it is not worthy of you."

"I really like it," she said, smiling to herself.

With Ash departed for Unova on another adventure, Lily found her days a little empty. She finally took Surge up on his offer to help her with Pikachu and Ampharos, but when she Mega Evolved Ampharos, he threatened to cut the lesson short right there. Mega Ampharos was a Dragon, after all, and Surge had neither the expertise nor the interest in messing around with Dragons. He changed his tune after he saw Mega Ampharos's devastating Thunder summon the rain and drain all the light from the day, and very graciously reconsidered.

But Lily had never been much of a fighter, perhaps to her detriment. It was not her fighting skills that added value to the institution that was the Elite Four, and knowing this she could not spend her days training when there was work to do. The trouble was, she did not quite know where to start. Cinnabar Island was still in shambles and would take years to rebuild, including her laboratory there. All the equipment and samples she and her colleagues had amassed over the years was melted, lost forever. She had to start over, and that meant catching up on decades of research. There was a staff to rehire after the tragic deaths of so many on Cinnabar Island, infrastructure to rebuilt and equipment to replace, and funding to secure to pay for it all. It was not a task she relished, though a necessary one.

The trouble was the waiting. Nothing would get finished overnight, possibly not even within the year. So she sought out a temporary distraction, anything to keep her mind occupied during the lull. It happened entirely by accident one day when she was chasing Pikachu down a hall in the Indigo Keep. The tricky rodent had stolen a frosted biscuit, which Lily feared would give her indigestion, but Pikachu would not give up her prize so easily. Lily ended up chasing her to a forgotten part of the Keep's northern wing, where at the top of the stairs in a lonely tower, there sat a door that could not be opened.

It was a door she and Ash had discovered when they first explored every inch of the castle so long ago. Lily had meant to call a locksmith to get the door open, for as far as she knew there was no key that fit in the lock, and none of the Rangers knew anything about what might lie beyond it. Intrigued and dying for something useful to do, Lily took the opportunity to get a locksmith over there as quick as could be, and after a bit of work, the door groaned on its ancient metal hinges and slowly swung open.

She coughed as the dust motes fled the cramped room, finally freed. The room was dim, the lone window dingy with a film of dust and grime, as thick as soap scum. The stone floor was covered by a musty brown carpet that had once been wine red. A couch, just barely big enough for three people to sit hip-to-hip, was crammed against one wall. Its green fabric had long since faded to murky grey, and the

cushions were so depressed from years of sitting and lying that they were hard as cardboard in the middle. A wide oaken desk sat under the grimy window. There was an old reading lamp with a green glass shade sitting on the desk. The room smelled of paper, old paper, wet and peeling, and silence, stagnant. No one had been in here for a very long time.

But what captured Lily's principle interest was the books. There were a hundred at least in this room no bigger than a bedroom, stacked and crammed in the floor-to-ceiling shelves pushed against all four walls. They were old books, some noticeably more so than others. She ran her fingers over soft leather spines, faded titles stamped in black or gold or brown, many in languages she did not read or even recognize. Some, however, she did.

On the Origins of the World, A Recovered History, she read the looping script silently.

Lily felt her breath catch in her throat and her heart begin to pound as she tugged the book from its nestled place in the shelf and opened it up in the middle. A light sheen of dust rose from the cover and clouded as she flipped the thick parchment pages, yellowed with age and well-worn from frequent use. She scanned a passage in chapter seven, titled *The Sacrifice*:

"...ascending in shadows, the Honored Ones waded together in still waters, hands entwined and heads bowed in prayer. The Dragons Three offered their steel blessing, and the waters opened to accept the gift..."

In the margins, someone had scribbled notes, underlined and circled important parts of the writing. *Human sacrifices,* Lily read the chicken scratch. The bibliophile had circled the words "Dragons Three" and drawn a line from them to another note in the margin: *Wielders.*

Lily replaced the book on the shelf and took another. This one was called *The Life and Reign of Tiamat: A Historical Mythology.* In it she found the same narrow handwritten notes throughout. Lily paused to read a short passage toward the beginning of the tome:

"...with the young princess was said to be one of the earliest encounters with the Spatial One, who shared with her the Blood. Tiamat named her Sword for the world she would build, for herself and for those who pledged their loyalty to her. Her world, or remnants of it, survive to this day, though Tiamat herself was forgotten. Most records that remain today were written more than seven hundred years after her death..."

The note-taker had circled the word "Blood" in dark pressed pencil, as if they had circled it on multiple occasions, puzzled and fascinated by that word. In the margins Lily read a word that sent chills down her spine: *Verden.* The name of the Taki Dynasty's sacred Dragonsteel sword.

And she knew whose handwriting this was, whose room she'd

stumbled into. Her hands shook, and she looked up at the countless books and manuscripts stuffed into this space, the well-worn couch where someone had fallen asleep reading by the light of the moon through the window, the desk littered with documents and notes from the last time it had been used. Tears filled her eyes, and she hugged the book close.

"Lance," she whispered his name, loud in the lonely silence.

This was his place. No, it was his life, the one he'd left behind. The part that no one knew or shared, locked away in this attic too small to accommodate more than one person comfortably. And she realized that he wouldn't have wanted it any other way, that he wouldn't have had a reason to share it with the others who'd been here with him. They would not have understood, just as Lily had not understood before.

She went to the desk, sniffled, and set the book down so she could sit in the old wooden chair. It was stiff and uncomfortable, difficult to fall asleep in. She imagined Lance sitting in this very chair, hunched over his research and his notes, the green lamp and the light of the moon his only illumination as he worked late into the night, inspired by the history and mythology and lore that oozed from every corner of the room. She could feel it, the magic in this place. It was in the musty smell of peeling paper and ink, the smoothed grooves in the chair from years of sitting, the quiet and the seclusion of a hidden cache of knowledge, protected from the world and those who might seek to misconstrue it or destroy it or even disseminate it. There was magic in secrets, a world away from the world only he knew. And now, she knew it, too.

Lily ran her fingers over his handwritten notes, neat and narrow script in bold black ink. Everything was handwritten, no sign of printouts or even an old typewriter. Everything he'd produced in this room existed nowhere else in the world, saved to no hard drives or filed away in electronic archives. She laughed sadly and caught a few tears on her wrist as she read his words, his theories and ideas, the passion that leaped off the pages as he interacted with the information he had consumed.

What are Titans? she read his words. *We are not Tamers, yet the distinction seems no longer to matter. Why? For what purpose did Palkia, Dialga, and Giratina create us thousands of years before the other Tamers ever came to be? And why did we leave their sacred land? All questions to which I find myself without answers. I have read the texts, the histories that may be pure fabrication and the mythologies that may possess kernels of truth within, but still the answers elude me. Where does the fantasy become reality? Or is it that the fantasy is reality? All I have learned is that I know very little, and yet I am only ever more determined to seek the*

truth...

Lily smiled as she read his personal thoughts, likely recorded with the knowledge that no one but him would ever read them. She could hear his voice as if he were telling her these things in person, leaning over her shoulder and whispering them in her ear.

"Who are we, really?" he asked her, perched on the desk with one leg bent at the knee, the other dangling like a cat's, and he gazed out the window to the great wide world beyond. "Why did we leave Sinnoh? Everything I know, I learned from books written by others. But if I were to go out into the world, to see for myself, what would I find?" He looked at her, this dream version of Lance, fuzzy and faded at the edges and bright like fire. "What would you find?"

Lance had done terrible things in his life, things for which the world would never forgive him. Lily wasn't sure she could ever forgive him, either, not really. People did not change. If Lance had taught her anything, he had taught her that. But people also had hidden depths within them, extraordinary places buried deep, and only with time and care and honesty could they come to light, as they had for Lance, and for her. Their time in the Kyukai Valley together had illuminated parts of Lance she had never dreamed existed, and perhaps he'd never dreamed it, either. He was the tyrant and the terrorist, but he was also a man of passion and pride, pride that he desired to share with her when she deigned to listen. He had made poor choices, and no amount of pity for his past hardships could absolve him of those choices. But those choices were only a few scales on the Dragon. We are more than our mistakes, and that is the joy and the tragedy of being human.

And if in the end his mistakes ever came back to haunt the world, as they nearly had with Mewtwo, she would be there to stop him. Not because it was her responsibility, although on some level she believed as an Elite Four she was responsible, but because of what Lance was. What she was. Perhaps Clair had the right of it in the end: Titans take care of their own. Whether to protect them or to stop them, from the world or from each other, Titans take care of their own.

Lily had discovered depths within her she had neither known nor cared to know before Lance. He had given her a gift more precious than any she had ever received. She could feel it in these cozy walls, in the words he'd written, in the scars that proved she had survived. This place had been his, and now it was hers. The history, the mythology, the pride and the passion, the memories, they were hers now. And if he was out there somewhere in the world, and she knew he was, she knew he would be the first to tell her so.

"Stay," he whispered, slipping off the desk to wrap his arms around her, guiding her hands over the pages and pages of his work. "Stay, and you'll understand a little of what I mean."

By the time Jonathan came looking for her, it was the next morning and Lily had fallen asleep on the old sofa, a stack of Lance's notes scattered on the carpet and a huge book so old the title had faded away under years of readers' fingers open over her chest. Pikachu was snoozing on top of the book, and she woke Lily when she heard Jonathan calling on the floor below.

"Ma'am?" Jonathan was calling. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I thought you should know Gym Leader Gary's Aerodactyl was spotted Flying this way. I thought you would want to be there to receive him and Ranger Ivy?"

"Thanks, Jonathan," Lily called back, hastily getting up and smoothing her mussed hair. "I'll, um, I'll be down in a minute. Oh, hang on a sec, Jonathan!"

Lily locked the door to Lance's study behind her, and Pikachu raced down the stairs to greet Jonathan. He was in his Indigo Ranger uniform, as always, and looking a little flushed from his searching the castle for her, no doubt. Lily felt a little bad making him run around when he had better things to do.

"Hi, morning," Lily said. "Sorry, just real quick. Can you book me passage on a ship to Hoenn?"

Jonathan blinked at her. "Hoenn? But you only just returned."

Lily waved him off. "Oh sorry, not like tomorrow. I meant more like next month. I have a lot to do here still, but I want to leave as soon as I can."

Jonathan nodded. "Of course, I can look into it today."

"Great, thanks!"

"Ma'am," Jonathan said. "I wonder, well, I know it's none of my business, but what's in Hoenn? You've never mentioned an interest in traveling there before. Is it for your research?"

Lily smiled, and her eyes twinkled with that spark of adventure people get when they're on the cusp of something so daring and crazy that it just might be worth the trip. "Let's just say I'm in the market for a new sword, and I've heard Hoenn's the place to look."

Jonathan gave her a look like he wanted to point out that Lily had never owned or used a sword, but he nodded all the same and politely kept his curiosity to himself. "Well, I'll get back to you with some travel options later today."

"Thanks. I'm really looking forward to this trip. I think I'll learn a lot."

"Oh, I'm sure you know quite a bit more than any of us ever will already."

"Not really," Lily said. "I actually know very little, but I'm ready to learn."

It was a promise she intended to keep, no matter where the road

led her. It was hers to follow now, and she would follow it until the end. And who knew? The world was a big place, and the Titans had scattered from Sinnoh to every corner of it and beyond. There was no telling who she might meet along the way, how they might change her life, and how she might change theirs.

Far away.

That was all Mewtwo knew of this place he had landed in after escaping the Dragon's maw. He used every ounce of his willpower to Teleport himself far away, and far away was where he woke up. It was strange to think that there was a place even more distant than the Kyukai Valley, where he'd landed before. But this time, he would not be followed, he knew. He closed his eyes and he could not see the Dragons' shadows anymore, no matter how far he gazed. Instead, the his eyes showed him lush forest and soft sand, their colors dimmed by night and their outlines aglow with moonlight, skeletal. Instead of pine and winter, he smelled salt and sea. The battle and bloodshed were distant echoes beaten back by the tide of memory, and now he heard only the tide itself, waves pushing gently against the beach below. He stood at the edge of a tall cliff, and below he saw the ocean that stretched interminably, as if it had swallowed everything that had existed before and beyond.

Mewtwo was so exhausted that he could not comfortably remain upright, and he collapsed to his knees in the grass. His thick tail supported his weight, and he clutched his throbbing head in his paw, willing the pain to dull. He needed rest. The fight with the Dragons had taken much out of him. The way they had transformed their Pokemon was a power Mewtwo did not understand, something he had never seen before and something the wild Pokemon of the valley did not know. It was an old power, blood magic, strong enough to have killed him if he wasn't careful and the Dragons weren't blinded by their endless pride.

He was lost in thought and somehow did not notice the presence that lingered at the edges of his senses. Mewtwo whirled, but something was blocking him. Like trying to make out voices through heavy static, he could not quite make out the presence watching him. The darkness rippled, and he recognized the conjured power. Before the telekinetic energy could gather, he reached for it and picked it apart like wet noodles, strand by strand, stretching it and scattering it. It was over in seconds, and his head throbbed all the more for the effort. As he was, he was as weak as a newborn Mareep, but even Mareep could shock anything that came too close.

Mewtwo was not sure how much shock he had left in him, though, and when the presence approached, he waited. Would it try to kill him? Hurt him? Or was it merely curious?

Not it, they, he realized when he felt them draw closer. *Not they...her.*

A human woman led the others, Pokemon whose names he did not know but who shared them when he touched their minds. Reuniclus and Gothitelle, Chimecho and Chingling. Their jingling was pleasant, dulling the senses, and he realized they were doing it on purpose. Wary, Mewtwo pushed himself up on his feet and stomped the ground with his tail. A Psychic wave rippled around him, flashing blue, enough to send a warning but not enough to cause damage.

Stay back, he warned them all, his soundless voice bellowing in their heads to be heard.

It was the human woman who spoke for them, though she did not speak at all.

"You've finally come."

He could hear her in his head as clearly as if she were inches away. Her voice was soft and hushed, but there was an unwavering strength behind her words, a kind of strength that comes from familiarity. She had done this before, and so had he.

Clairvoyant, Mewtwo remembered the word for the boy who had been like him, the one who had dreamed of him when he was still a prisoner.

"You're hurt," she said gently, closer. *"Let me help you."*

No, Mewtwo said on instinct. *Stay back. I won't give a warning next time.*

There was a moment of hesitation. Her Psychics bristled with power, wary and mistrustful of Mewtwo. He did not blame them, but he did wonder. The Dragons controlled their Pokemon. They did not have a choice but to obey, as Mewtwo had witnessed first hand. But Psychics bowed to no man unless by choice. Why did these follow a human? Even one who was more than human?

Gothitelle sashayed closer. Mewtwo could see her clearly in the moonlight, a maiden in her mourning blacks with sad eyes. But Gothitelle was not sad at all. All Mewtwo could feel from her was a fierce desire to protect her charge at all costs. It was so strong that Mewtwo was sure she would give her life for it.

Why? He demanded of Gothitelle. *Why be a slave to a human?*

But Gothitelle swelled defiantly at that word, *slave*. She was no slave, she was a protector. A soldier. A healer and a teacher. She had taught this human much and more, and in turn learned things that could only be taught by another.

What could a human ever teach me? Mewtwo said scathingly.

Love.

The word lingered like a high musical note, faint and delicate, but enduring and clear. It was Gothitelle's voice, and it was Reuniclus's

and the others', too. It was not a voice at all, but a feeling, a memory. He could see through Gothitelle's eyes, her memories of a time when she was small and needed the human to protect her. Caitlin, she was called, a happy child with bright eyes and full of life. And suddenly Mewtwo saw through those bright eyes, saw Gothitelle change and grow, saw Alakazam stand tall and proud before a mighty Dragon of darkness in a ruined palace. He saw Alakazam change with the same ancient power that had changed Charizard and Ampharos, and he saw Alakazam fall to the darkness, crushing and cold. And then he saw no more. His eyes would not open no matter how brightly the sun shone, no matter how hard he scratched at them, no matter how many tears he cried. There was only the lingering pain, the loss where the love had been, and there seemed no reason to open his eyes ever again.

When Mewtwo opened his true eyes and the dream vision faded, he was on his knees again struggling to stay upright, and Caitlin stood before him an arm's length away. He looked up at her deadened milky eyes, silver-bright in the moonlight and reflecting all the light she could not see. Her golden hair fell in long wavy tresses about her, thick as bolts of silk, and her face was pale and sad. But when Mewtwo looked up at her, he felt a warmth he had felt not long ago. He thought of Lily, the Daughter of Dragons who had crossed a continent to find him.

"It's not about control," her voice entreated in his memories, *"it's a connection."*

"A connection," Caitlin said, hearing his thoughts. "Yes, a connection... I saw you here, long ago, but I didn't understand."

She reached a pale hand out. Her fingers were cold against Mewtwo's scarred temple, but not unpleasant. He was so tired, and for one maddening moment, he dreamed of closing his eyes and falling asleep right there under her unseeing gaze. It would be nice, he fantasized, to feel...to feel...

And suddenly he felt everything. He was transported back in time to a dark, wet place, his old prison tank under Mt. Cinnabar. He could feel the heat of the volcano, the claustrophobia of the glass on all sides, the creeping agony of his disease like embers under his skin, slow to burn and searching for something to catch on. He felt his shame, his anger, all of it erupt with the volcano and crush the island and all its oblivious inhabitants who'd done nothing at all to help. He felt the emptiness that followed, that hollow feeling that no amount of fury could fill, and how that had made him even angrier. He felt the freezing cold of the Kyukai Valley, the fear of the Furret he had driven from their hovel, the shuddering acceptance of the one he'd killed and eaten. He felt its blood hot on his gums and dribble down his chin, salty and rich. He felt the hours turn to days turn to nights, light to

dark to light again, the passage of time all in silence and shadow as he hid from the world like some crepuscular vermin just beneath the surface. He felt the fear of being hunted, the feral furor of becoming the hunter, and finally the loss. Lily shook and shuddered in his hangman's grip, ready for death but refusing to let him win. How was that possible? How could she have won when he held all the power? Her life was literally in his hands, and still he felt...he felt...

"Make your choice," she dared him.

"You poor creature," Caitlin said, her voice twisting in that way humans have that means they will cry, as if something inside has cracked and bent and they can no longer form words clearly. "You have suffered and lost more than anyone ever should."

Mewtwo stared up at her. She was blind, doomed to darkness, it was plain to look upon her. And yet, he could not shake the feeling that she saw him as clearly as he saw her. Perhaps she could. To know one's past, one's heart, was to see them, was it not? The way he had seen Lance and found him wanting, and the way he'd seen Lily and felt...felt...

"You've been alone for so long," Caitlin said, though there was no pity in her voice, just a tired sadness, as if she had been here before. "But you haven't lost everything. And you need not be alone anymore. I see it... That's why you've come."

But what she did next surprised him, and he was sure there was nothing more humans could do to surprise him. She turned from him and headed back the way she'd come, which he now saw was a white-painted villa far removed from the human settlement below the cliffs. Her Pokemon followed, unwilling to leave her side. And Mewtwo found himself with another choice to make.

He sat there for what felt like a very long time, but when he crawled to his shaking feet, Caitlin was not halfway to her villa. She sensed him approaching and stopped to wait. Mewtwo stared back at her, at those filmy eyes that shimmered in the moonlight.

He had told the Dragons who had hunted him of his hatred for humanity, for their cruelty and callousness. And yet, even in them, he had seen another side, a hidden depth he had never been allowed to see. It had been enough to make his choice then. Would it be enough now?

His feet were moving before he finished the thought, drawn to her if not out of some sense of trust or loyalty, then at least out of curiosity. She knew, at least, what it was to live in darkness. Perhaps there was more she knew, and more she could understand.

A life for a life, he had told Lily. For saving his, he would spare hers. But what came next? What would he do with this life he had? He hadn't gotten that far. He had never expected to.

"Please, come inside," Caitlin offered, holding the screen porch door open for Mewtwo. "You will be safe here for as long as you choose to stay."

Mewtwo managed to stand at his full height, and he found that he was considerably taller than her. He was taller than most humans he'd seen, but he was especially tall next to Caitlin. Curious, he touched her temple with his paw, and she gasped. For one transient second, her dead eyes flared to light and to life, as bright as the summer sun. She saw him, and he saw her.

One night, he told her, thinking that he would leave on the morrow when he was rested.

But he would not leave on the morrow, or the day after that, or the day after that. Mewtwo would stay with her, this Clairvoyant blind woman who could see depths deep and dark, and who would teach him to see, too. He would never call her master, never obey without question, never belong to anyone or anything again, least of all to her. But he would stay, at least for a little while, and he would learn that it wasn't about control.

It's a connection, he said as he closed his eyes and felt Caitlin's hand over his heart, slick with her blood and the magic growing between them.

He felt it.

Chapter End Notes

Happy holidays!! This is my present to all of you lovely readers.

I can hardly believe it, but we have reached the end of this story! As is usually the case, I'm both happy and sad about this, but mostly happy. It needed telling given how Triumvirate didn't give me a chance to develop Lily's and Ash's characters as much as I wanted to, and Mewtwo's story needed to be told.

As you can probably guess from Lily's ending here, her adventures will continue in the Hoenn fic, which is a project I have in the works. She'll appear there as a side character, but nonetheless her role will have an effect on that fic's plot. As for Ash, he's headed off to Unova for an appearance in Clash of Crowns, which is currently ongoing. Mewtwo is also in Unova with Caitlin. So if you want to know what happens to both Ash and Mewtwo next, I encourage you to read Clash of Crowns! I've been putting off updating it so I could finish this story for that exact reason.

Lastly, thank you so, so, SO much to everyone who has followed this story from start to finish. Your kudos, comments, and messages have meant so much to me. They've helped shape this story in ways you probably don't realize, not the least of

which is hearing what is interesting to you guys to read more about (like the lore stuff, to name one example). Feedback actually can make a difference, and even if it doesn't, it's extremely motivating and humbling to receive. So thank you so much to those of you who've taken the time to give it. You guys really do keep me going.

I hope to see you all over on Clash of Crowns as I get back to updating that, and of course Tartarus if any of you are reading that one! And one day, hopefully not in the too distant future, we'll be heading to Hoenn and Sinnoh. Until next time!

Afterword

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!